# Prologue

Matteo and Anton stood either side of the double-doors, both bored out of their minds. They had been standing there for several hours, and were to stand there for several hours more. They were used to these great lengths of standing, but it was still difficult and tedious for mind and body. From where they stood, they could both see the palace garden just outside the open window, more specifically, the tops of the fruit trees.

The capital was built in a warm climate, though was not too hot. It was a place that rained often, but never too heavily, and there were very rarely any droughts. The forests around the capital were healthy, green, beautiful, and thriving with wildlife. Just like within the palace gardens.

'*Oh look*' Matteo whispered, craning his head. '*Did you see that butterfly?*'

'*No, I missed it*' Anton whispered back. '*What was it?*'

'*It was a Poplar Admiral*' Matteo replied.

'*Ah*' Anton nodded. '*They are lovely. Lovely blue…and the orange border…very pretty*.'

'*Mh-hm*.'

Another hour of silence passed.

'*How's your aunt?* Anton spoke quietly.

'*She's doing alright'* Matteo said, *'I can't say anything to my wife but…'* he fell silent for a few moments, Anton said nothing, waiting for him to continue. *'She still hasn't shut up.'*

*'Who? Your wife or aunt?'*

*'Well.'* Matteo chuckled quietly, '*they're both giving me grief*.'

Anton smiled.

'*Good thing I moved away*' Anton said. '*I don't have to deal with such grief*.'

'*You miss your family*?' Matteo turned his head towards Anton, keeping his body completely still.

'*Of course I do*' Anton replied, staring at the leaves of the trees through the window, hoping for a glimpse of another butterfly. '*It's just nice to get some freedom. Maybe this is sort of like having a glimpse of what its like to be um…you know…an only child*.'

'*Oh yeah. I forgot you had a thousand siblings*.'

'*I have seven*' Anton replied patiently. '*All sisters*' he sighed painfully.

Another pause.

'*Your eldest sister is getting married isn't she-?*'

There was an abrupt sound from the room behind them, muffled through the wooden door.

Anton and Matteo became suddenly tense, eyes wide.

They both glanced to each other, then glanced to the door between them.

'*What was that?*' Anton whispered.

'*How should I know?*' Matteo hissed back.

They both looked back to the door between them, waiting, listening silently. But no more sounds came.

'*It…*' Anton spoke slowly, '*sounded like glass…breaking'*

Matteo said nothing, but continued to glare at the door.

'*Should we go in?*' Anton asked quietly.

'*Are you insane?*' Matteo snapped, though continued to keep his voice quiet.

'*I'm sorry I…*'

‘*Just hush*’ Matteo interrupted, facing ahead again. ‘*Say nothing*.’
They both faced ahead again, falling back into the silent statues.
The day grew late, night came, and went, and the guards switched several times. As their shifts came to an end, different men would come to replace the ones before, and the incident with sound of breaking glass was forgotten.
However, come morning, when the maid arrived to give breakfast to the queen, a shocking discovery was made.
The queen was dead. The sound of breaking glass had been her knocking over several cut-glass decanters when she collapsed, suffering from a stroke.
Her body was cold by the time it was discovered.
The news spread quickly; calls rang down the corridors of the palace.
‘The queen is dead! The queen is dead! Free the Prince from the tower!’

Born to a poor family in a small town, Brunhilde grew up as an only child, her father was a shoemaker, her mother a laundress. She excelled in school and grew interested in politics.
As she matured in age, she organised strikes and protests for revolutionary movements, joining political parties, and running several newspapers. A civil war followed, and she used her role to manipulate her way into a position of power, eventually becoming queen, removing, and exiling her opponents.
In her youth she wanted to make her country a better place for the working poor, eventually however, she became a dictator, who ruled with absolute and unwavering control, working people to death and seizing land. Millions died through starvation, not even her closest supporters were safe. She became more paranoid over the years, creating a cult of obedience around her.
She executed her enemies using The Red Army, sending others to working camps. After an assassination attempt, she became suspicious of even her own doctors. Eventually dying of a stroke, unable to receive any help as everyone was too scared to enter her room.
She was found the next morning by the maid who entered to give the queen her breakfast.
Had she received help immediately, she may have been saved. Her early death was brought on by years of an unhealthy lifestyle, but doctors were too scared to treat her, for fear of being accused of trying to harm her in some way. And so, they all told her for the longest time, that her symptoms were nothing to be worried of.
Despite the atrocities she had committed in her shortened life, she was revered by many as a great ally, to an even more formidable and evil force elsewhere in the world.
War was a complicated thing, and life was not so black and white.
She was a hard worker, working up to fifteen hours a day. When she drew deeply from her pipe, it meant she was in a good mood.
Brunhilde rarely slept, suffering from insomnia. She would spend many nights instead staying awake, caring for the sick animals that were bought to her. She had an animal sanctuary within her palace home, and would care for animals of all kinds. From small rodents to horses, and

was unwaveringly patient towards them. She refused to eat any animal product, and loved her dog very much. Moreso it seemed, than her own children, of which she had one left.
At the end of the day, she read books on poetry, and nature, and the stars.
Brunhilde was given a grand funeral once it was all over. Her body preserved and put on display.
She looked truly magnificent, beautiful, angelic even.
As for her son, her last remaining child, he was nowhere to be found.

## Chapter One
## The Patchwork Girl

It was a hot and stuffy day. The tall figure easily made a path for himself through the crowd. Towering over the heads of the others, people would move back to allow him space, mostly out of fear, for it was clear at a glance that this was no ordinary being.
The tall figure had his face covered by a large piece of black cloth, which concealed nearly his entire head.
The figure was dressed in incredibly fine clothing. The materials he wore were of velvet and silk, black and red in colour and lined in gold. The cuffs of his shirt were made of fine jewels, glistening in the bright light of the sun.

It was noisy here, very noisy, and clustered. The constant murmur of the crowd was a little unsettling for the tall man. He would usually walk in fields of tulips, or the singing forests near his cottage home, or simply sit quietly inside, perhaps in his greenhouse, or in his rocking chair by the fire.
He was a recluse by nature, and loved the peace of nature undisturbed. But every once in a blue moon, he would venture out into civilisation.
Today was one of these rare days. Today, he was drawn to the market, in search of a very specific item. A flower seed for his garden, of a type that was rare in these regions, but common in lands oversea.
He found something else in its stead.

The tall man slowed to a stop, turning his head to the side towards the low wooden bench beside him, upon which sat a line of women.
Their wrists were bound in leather, and each of them wore thick leather collars, a heavy metal hoop hanging from the front. Running through this hoop were chains, holding them in place.
Slaves. They were to be sold soon at auction.
One of the women caught the attention of the tall man, the one at the end of the line, and he could not look away.

‘My gosh…’ the tall man breathed, ‘you’re…’
‘Ugly’ the woman finished; head bowed. ‘I know.’
‘No’ the tall man shook his head. ‘You’re the most beautiful girl I’ve ever seen…’
She raised her head then, eyes wide in disbelief. At that moment, a gust of wind lifted the cloth that covered the tall man, and she was able to get a glimpse of his head.
Her heart skipped a beat, and she let out a slight gasp. What she saw beneath the cloth was not what she had expected.
Beneath the black fabric was the skull of an animal, with curved horns and eyes that glowed gold in dark sockets.
The girl knew instantly then what he was. He was a mage, a rare creature, and one both greatly feared and revered.
The girl never thought she would ever see one in her life.

# Foxcall Tower

The mage sat back in the carriage, letting out a slow breath.
He turned his head to the side, looking outwards through the open carriage door. From where he sat, he could see the girl a short distance away. She stood with her back to him now, leaning forwards over a little patch of flowers, watching the bees hovering around.
She seemed to be mesmerized by them.
'Beatrice?' the mage called out. 'Would you come over here please?'
The girl straightened then, turning away from the flowers, and moving over towards the carriage.
She slowed when she came closer to the open door, hesitating a little.
'Come' the mage said, his face and head forever expressionless.
His eyes were glowing in their sockets, and the bone was warmed from the light of the sun, from the time he had spent outside.
'You do not need to be afraid' he spoke kindly to her.
Beatrice pursed her lips, something she did when she was unsure, silent for a moment longer before speaking.
'I am not afraid.'
'Oh?'
Beatrice dipped her head, brushing a strand of black hair behind an ear.
'Your skin is so beautiful' the mage said to her.
'You're the only one to have ever said that to me' Beatrice spoke quietly. 'Perhaps the only one to even have thought it.'
'Beauty is in the eye of the beholder' the mage responded. 'And I think you are utterly beautiful, a truly living masterpiece.'
'Why do you think that?' Beatrice uttered, unconsciously touching her patchwork skin. 'I… uh.'
'What were you looking at over there?' the mage asked.
'What was I…? Oh. Just the flowers.'
'You like flowers?'
'I do.'
'Why?'
Beatrice thought for a moment.
'Because they are beautiful' she replied.
'And what makes them beautiful?'
'I don't really know.' Beatrice said, 'I guess the bright colours?'
'So, you don't like flowers that are black or dark colours?'
Beatrice fell silent. She said nothing for a time, but the mage continued to watch her expectantly. He was waiting for an answer from her it seemed. It was hard for Beatrice to tell. He was a difficult being to read, it was something she would have to get used to.
'I think I would like dark coloured flowers' Beatrice replied at last.
'So it's not the colour,' the mage said leaning forwards. 'If it's not the colour, then what is it?'
'I don't know.'
The mage leant back into his seat.

‘We are leaving this place’ he told her. ‘We are going home.’
Beatrice pursed her lips again, making herself move.
She stepped forwards, taking the mage’s hand as he offered it to her. She climbed into the carriage. Once she sat opposite him, she drew away, shrinking back into herself.
She gave a slight start when the carriage began to move.
‘Who… who is driving?’ Beatrice asked.
‘Nobody’ the mage replied.
Beatrice blinked uncertainly at this. She leaned to the side, trying to catch a glimpse through the narrow window behind the mage.
Through this window she saw the front of the carriage. She saw no one sitting in the driving seat, but she saw a large creature that resembled an ox, pulling the carriage. It was a heavyset creature, its fur shaggy, is head slung-low.
Beatrice sat back again, feeling very uncertain. Whatever was out there, was a creature she had not seen before, but it must have been something of high intelligence to direct itself like that, either that, or it was relying on instinct and knew its way home.
Beatrice looked towards the mage. This being was her master now, her owner. He had bought her at the auction. She had not expected to see him again after he left her on the bench, chained with the other women, but he had returned, and had purchased her when no others had placed a bid.
No one else wanted her, because of her skin.
Her chains had been removed now, and she was able to move freely and without restriction.
Beatrice watched her master, opening her mouth to speak.
‘You…. said your name was Vladislav.’
‘Speak up child. There is no need to be so meek. You are a free person now.’
‘Do I not belong to you?’
Vladislav shifted in his seat, avoiding eye contact. It was almost as if the topic made him uncomfortable.
‘Well…legally yes but…I um…...’ he reached into his coat, pulling from one of the deeper pockets a folded slip of paper. It was the contract he had to sign before the slave had been handed over to him, it was the buyer’s agreement from the original buyer. The one who had owned the girl before him. ‘Here’ Vladislav said.
Beatrice watched mutely as Vladislav tore the contract up into several pieces, before tossing them out of the open window of the carriage. They were carried away on the warm winds, to become lost in time.
‘There’ Vladislav said with satisfaction. ‘Now there is no evidence of your enslavement.’
‘The seller still has a copy.’
Vladislav gave a snort; he appeared to be irritated.
‘Ok, so the seller has a copy. What if I go back and burn it?’
Beatrice’s eyes lowered to the floor of the carriage.
‘I suppose…that would remove all evidence of ownership.’
Vladislav nodded then, seemingly pleased with this, letting out a slow breath.
‘So’ he began, tilting his head towards the outside world as the carriage trundled on, ‘tell me, where you come from? Do you have family?’
Beatrice’s expression saddened then, clearly reluctant to answer.
She only replied after a long while, all the time Vladislav simply watching her, giving her no choice but to speak.

‘I have no home to go back to, if that’s what you’re asking’ Beatrice whispered, head down. ‘And I won’t run away either, if that’s what you were getting at.’
‘Haha.’ Vladislav let out a hiss. ‘Even if you tried, you could never escape from me. I will always find you.’ He bowed his head. ‘Don’t look so worried. I won’t treat you cruelly like your previous masters did.’ Vladislav leant forwards in his seat, reaching a gloved hand out to touch Beatrice. She flinched only slightly as he touched her arm. Upon her patchwork skin, could be seen there, nasty red lashes made by a whip, alongside several bruises. ‘I want you to consider yourself my equal’ Vladislav said to her. ‘You have nothing to fear from me.’
‘I…. could never’ Beatrice shook her head. ‘You are a mage. Even if I wasn’t born tainted like this….’
‘Your differences are what make you unique’ Vladislav told her. ‘Do not hide it or be ashamed. Wear it like amour, for it is beautiful.’
Beatrice listened to his words silently, choosing not to speak once Vladislav had finished.
After a time however, as Vladislav continued to watch her, Beatrice broke the silence.
‘Why did you buy me?’
‘Because I wanted to. It’s as simple as that.’ There was a pause. ‘I think you will fit in just wonderfully in my home. I live alone. Well…. I don’t. I mean…’ Vladislav seemed to ponder over what he wanted to say for a moment. ‘There are no other people where I live, but I have an assortment of different creatures. They are I find…. far more enjoyable company than humans.’
Beatrice bowed her head.
‘I look forward to getting to know you’ Vladislav said. ‘I want to see your true personality. I want to make you feel safe, enough for you to come out of your shell.’
Beatrice said nothing to this.
‘The journey will be long.’ Vladislav said to her. ‘I live far away from here.’ He paused. ‘Are you hungry?
Beatrice shook her head.
Vladislav let out a hiss.
‘Ok’ he said. ‘I will ask you again in about an hour.’
Vladislav fell silent then, saying no more.
Beatrice lifted her eyes, turning to gaze through the window.
The countryside beyond was beautiful.

## Chapter Two
## Tea and Scones

The journey was many hours long, and Beatrice had at one point fallen asleep, rocked gently towards her dreams by the movements of the carriage.
Beatrice was woken gradually. She raised her head, blinking, feeling a little confused.
‘How did I get here?’ Beatrice mumbled.

‘We are home.’ Vladislav spoke kindly to her, his solid face unmoved, though in his heart he was smiling. ‘You must have slept deeply’ Vladislav said, drawing his hand back. He had placed his hand upon hers. ‘How do you feel?’
‘I…suppose I am well’ Beatrice replied, sitting up. ‘I…’ she turned towards the carriage window. ‘Oh….’
The sights completely took her off-guard.
What she saw was a beautiful little cottage, modest, but brought to life by the garden around it, the flowers in the windows, and how clearly loved it was. The home and the surrounding lands were very well cared for, clean and tidy with ‘healthy materials.’ Not a sign of rot or aging could be seen in any part of the building. There was no dirt on the stone or the paths, and the grass and bushes and trees were all well-maintained.
There were little pathways that meandered around the home. Bushes overflowing with fruits and flowers had sprouted here and there. There were little decorative pebbles organised along the edge of the pathways, smooth and polished and glistening in the light. Smaller trees hung low, their branches sagging, little birds could be seen flittering through the white flowers. Different layers had been dug into the earth, and growing higher in taller tiers. From one of these nearby, had been created several little pools, miniature waterfalls trickled downwards from one tier to the next, eventually collecting at foot-level and flowing into a tiny river. Meandering around a few potted plants this river ran, before turning sharply into one of the nearby bushes and vanishing from sight.
‘What is this place?’ Beatrice uttered, as Vladislav reached for the carriage door, pushing it open.
‘This is my home’ Vladislav answered, climbing out of the carriage, and stepping out into the open, straightening his body up, pushing his shoulders back, and lifting his skeletal head up high. ‘And now….’ he said turning back to her. ‘It is your home too.’
Beatrice stared out of the carriage wide-eyed, appearing a little daunted, like she was afraid to step out into the garden.
‘Come now’ Vladislav soothed, reaching his hand out to her.
Beatrice hesitated, but something inside her seemed to shift.
She moved forward, taking his hand, seemingly reluctantly-so. Vladislav let go of her hand quickly as soon as she stepped out, straightening up.
It was windy outside, the leaves and grasses rustling all around them, Beatrice watched as several birds flittered over their heads.
‘My gosh, what is that?’
‘It’s a northern cardinal’ Vladislav replied, turning his head towards the little creature. ‘It’s a songbird. The male ones are vibrant red.’
‘It’s so beautiful’ Beatrice uttered, unable to tear her eyes away.
‘There is so much more for you to see’ Vladislav said, breathing heavily now. ‘Would you like to come inside?’
‘Yes.’
‘I wasn’t planning on buying you’ Vladislav admitted, as he led the way towards the cottage.
‘What about the uh…’
Vladislav turned back.
‘Are you going to unharness the uh….’
Vladislav began to make a noise.
‘Why are you hissing?’ Beatrice asked.

‘I am amused’ Vladislav said to her. ‘I express myself in different ways. You may have noticed’ Vladislav went on, ‘but I am unable to express myself in the same ways as you can, as other humans do.’
‘How did you get this way?’ Beatrice asked him. ‘Were you born human?’
Vladislav’s breath began to rattle, but his body remained unmoved.
‘I was yes, I….’ Vladislav broke off then, his glowing eyes fixed on Beatrice. ‘I would smile if I could. I must be about ninety years old now. After a time, you begin to lose track. It becomes less important. Maybe I am about one hundred and twelve. Who knows? Not me.’
Vladislav raised his head.
‘I will come back and unharness Spud later.’
‘Spud?’
‘That’s his name’ Vladislav informed her. ‘I raised him from a calf after his mother died. I thought he wouldn’t make it, but he pulled through. When I realised that he was going to live, only then did I give him a name. I though Spud was a fitting one.’
Beatrice stared at him, unsure of what to make of this. Unsure of how she perhaps should react.
‘Come with me’ Vladislav said to Beatrice. ‘As I was saying, I wasn’t planning on buying you. I don’t have a room prepared for you. I can fix a place for you to stay, a bed, somewhere to put your clothes, whatever possessions you….’ Vladislav paused then, glancing back at her. ‘You will gain possessions in time’ he finished. ‘I will buy you anything you want. And I will buy you whatever clothes you want and need. You um…will have to come with me to the clothing shops when we buy you clothes. I have no idea what to buy for a lady. I can’t remember if I ever had to do such a thing before.’
He let out a high-pitched whine.
‘Why are you making that noise?’
‘I’m uncomfortable’ Vladislav replied.
‘Why?’
Vladislav turned away silently.
‘Are you embarrassed?’
‘Come on’ Vladislav said. ‘Let’s go inside. I will show you the place.’
‘I didn’t know you could feel such things’ Beatrice said to him, following in his footsteps as they made their way towards the little wooden cottage.
‘Of course I have thoughts and feelings’ Vladislav said to her. ‘I may not be entirely human anymore, but some parts of the person I used to be still remain.’
‘Can you feel love?’
Vladislav slowed to a stop then, head bowed.
Beatrice who had been walking behind him stopped also, staring at the back of his head.
The mage’s long black hair lifted in the wind.
‘I don’t know’ Vladislav replied, before continuing to walk.
Beatrice hurried after him.

They reached the little front door of the cottage, the stone steps were wide, the plants overflowed and spilled from the flowerbeds onto the steps.
Beatrice saw out of the corner of her eye, a long and fat orange lizard, with jet-black eyes.
‘It’s ok’ Vladislav said to her, noticing her lingering attention. ‘It’s not dangerous.’

‘I’ve never seen such a thing before.’
‘There are a lot of things here that are perhaps new to you’ Vladislav said. ‘It will take some time to get used to it all.’
Beatrice glanced away, head dipped, looking at nothing in particular.
Vladislav watched her for a few moments, before turning to the door.
He pushed it open. It wasn’t even locked.
Beatrice’s eyes were wide with curiosity, and she couldn’t help but lean forwards, eager to see despite her fears and reservations. She wondered what the home of such a character would look like.
Vladislav turned his skull-head towards her, eyes glowing, but sockets dark, always dark.
‘After you?’ Vladislav offered.
Beatrice swallowed nervously, pursing her lips.
She refused to show her fears, wanting to make herself strong.
Beatrice stepped forwards, she entered the home, glancing all around her.
The entrance rooms and hallway could be seen from where she stood, they were made of dark and beautiful wood. The archways were dark wood, the stairs were dark with even darker banisters made of ebony. Strange things were dotted about the place, so many trinkets and ornaments and things here and there. Even from the single spot she was now, Beatrice could see so much.
Strange pieces of art she could not fully understand, patterns, so many patterns, things that moved in a never-ending cycle, faces and portraits, illustrations on the wall of men and creatures, planets, models of planets moving around one another, shelves and shelves of books, strange things, optical illusions that her mind could not quite fully understand, puzzles, and colours and smoke coming from somewhere. Pots of paint, open books, plans and a drawing of…no, models of lizards coming off the paper. They were moving.
Beatrice turned back to Vladimir, eyes wide and shimmering.
‘This is everything I own’ Vladimir said to her, stepping forwards, over the threshold and into the home. ‘My entire life’s work and discoveries. Many lifetimes for any human.’
Beatrice turned away from Vladislav, looking back to all that was around her. It was all so overwhelming.
‘Are you hungry?’ Vladislav offered.
Beatrice faced the mage again, shaking her head feverishly.
‘Oh, come now…’ Vladislav said, striding past her, moving slow and gracefully. ‘The journey was long, and heavens knows when you last ate, or what you ate for that matter. You must be hungry. I will make you something nice.’
Vladislav continued to walk away, pausing at the end of the corridor, seeing Beatrice had not moved.
‘If you would like to follow me’ the mage prompted.
‘Oh, yes…. sorry.’
‘Don’t worry about the door’ Vladislav told her, as she glanced back to the front door that had been left open. ‘It’s ok as it is.’
Beatrice was about to make her way forwards after the mage, when she suddenly froze, seeing something out of the corner of her eye.
She turned back to the door, seeing a creature stepping through.
It was a doe. She ignored Beatrice as she wandered casually into the home, heading through one of the archways and into the other room, out of sight.

Beatrice continued to stare in surprise, hands clutched together over her chest.
A few moments later, the doe walked back out of the room, back out through the front door, and back outside. It was almost as if she had entered to fetch something, before heading out again.
'There are lots of red deer here' Vladislav voiced then. 'Some of them have become very tame. There have been a few young ones that have been abandoned by their mothers for various reasons. It's said that a doe can tell if her young is sick or if there is something wrong. That's why they are left forgotten. I have raised a few fawns over the years. Sometimes they like to invite themselves inside. They just like to look around. I think it's very funny. Such curious things…'
Vladislav turned his head towards Beatrice.
'The kitchen is this way' he prompted.
Vladislav headed down the corridor, leaving Beatrice behind. She took a deep and slow breath, trying her best to calm her pounding heart.
She felt so completely out of her depths, like she was in an entirely new country. Not just a few hundred miles away from her home, but oceans away instead.
Beatrice lowered her hands, changing her posture into one more relaxed. She didn't feel confident at all, but she was going to at least try to fake it.
Trying to push all her worries from her mind, she stepped forwards. Vladislav was out of sight now, but she found him easily enough. The kitchen was at the end of the corridor, a cosy and sizable room. At this time, it was cool and pleasant, the windows above the sink that looked out onto the garden were open. Beatrice could see baskets of flowers hanging just outside the glass, and below the window itself were flowers too, of many colours.
'Please sit down' Vladislav invited.
Beatrice did so, sitting upon one of the tall stools at the dark table.
'What sort of food do you like?' Vladislav asked her.
'I…don't really know.'
'Hm. Well, we can talk more about that later in more detail. I want to find out everything about you, all that I can.'
Beatrice said nothing.
'Do you like scones?'
'Scones?'
'You've had a scone before, haven't you?'
Beatrice stared at him unblinking.
'I…don't know what that is.'
Vladislav faltered then, seemingly caught by surprise.
'Oh, well…how do I describe it?' he began to emit a high-pitched whine suddenly.
Beatrice found this sound to be very odd.
'It's a sort of…. let me think. It's like a sweet bread…' Vladislav tilted his head thoughtfully, 'you eat it with cream and jam.'
Beatrice continued to stare at Vladislav. He produced another high-pitched whine before turning quickly away.
'I'll, get you some…scones I mean. Do you want anything to drink?'
'I don't know.'
'Are you ok with water? The water here is good, fresh, and clean. Or tea? Tea goes best with scones I think. Do you like any flavoured tea?'

Beatrice hesitated, watching Vladislav bustling around the kitchen. She realised he was waiting for an answer as he paused, glancing back towards her.
'I…...'
She trailed off, unable to finish.
'I'll make you some plain tea' Vladislav spoke quietly, turning back around and continuing to pull out plates and dishes, reaching for the stove and flicking his hand towards the kettle.
Beatrice watched closely, seeing a fire beneath the kettle now.
She wondered how he did that, had he used magic?
The silence within the kitchen stretched on, broken only by the sound of Vladislav, as he began to collect what he needed upon a single tray.
He paused, glancing over his shoulder towards Beatrice.
Their eyes met, at least Beatrice thought this was the case. It was hard to tell, since all she could see within the mage's dark hollow eye-sockets, were those strange glowing orbs.
Beatrice pursed her lips, sharply turning her head again, looking towards the floor instead.
Vladislav too looked back the other way.
Beatrice sat awkwardly at the table as she waited for him to finish making the tea.
It was only a few moments later when Vladislav came over to her, carrying everything on a tray.
Beatrice glanced down at the tray as he placed it upon the table. It was decorated with flowers, pinks and whites and yellows. Even the teapot and the tea cups and the little sugar pot was pattered in a similar way, maybe even sweeter, perhaps sickly so. At the base of the teacups were bright pink hearts, above these were flowers, and amongst them, were little fieldmice, with cute beady little eyes and small hands.
Beatrice blinked curiously at this, glancing tentatively up at Vladislav.
'Is everything alright?' he asked her.
'Yes,' she answered shortly.
Vladislav waited, expecting her to say more. When she didn't, he prompted her.
'What is it?'
Beatrice hesitated, speaking now only with great reluctance.
'It's just uh…' she fumbled over her words for a short time. 'It's a very nice tea set.'
Vladislav began to hiss. Beatrice leant back, a look of concern upon her face.
'Have I upset you?'
'No no' Vladislav hastened. 'It's not like that. I was hissing because I was amused.'
'You hiss when you're amused?'
'Yes. As you can probably tell by looking at me, I'm not exactly human. I communicate in ways different to what you would be familiar with.'
'Are there others of your kind?'
'Yes. Although, they are few and far between. The last time I met one like myself, heavens….it was so long ago…'
As he had been speaking, Vladislav had been unloading the tray, placing the cups and saucers on the table, the small plate of scones, the jam and cream.
He sat down as he began to reminisce, head tilted towards the ceiling, a strange whirring sound emitting from his throat.
'…she was like me.'
'She?' Beatrice whispered.

‘Yes. Our kind do not occur naturally, its more…uh…’ he began to whine quietly then before continuing to speak. ‘It’s complicated. But there *are* others like me. The last one I met was a female.’
He stopped abruptly.
‘What was she like?’ Beatrice asked.
‘Well?’ Vladislav was silent for a few moments. ‘She was mad.’
Beatrice baulked.
This was not was she had expected to hear.
Vladislav let out a slow breath.
‘Would you like some tea?’ he offered.
Beatrice nodded mutely.
‘And you simply must try a scone. They are my favourite, so delicious and sweet. Do you like milk with your tea? Any sugar?’
Beatrice hung her head then, cheeks going red.
‘What’s the matter?’
‘I…. never tried tea before’ Beatrice replied meekly, her voice barely audible. ‘I don’t know how I like it.’
Vladislav hesitated at this, frozen for a few moments before coming to himself again.
‘Well…that’s ok. There’s a first time for everything. Here, let me give you just a little bit of milk and sugar. See what you think of it. And here is a scone for you. I’ll put the jam and cream on for you, this is how much I like to put for myself. I guess that’s the average amount of jam and cream? Oh, listen to me rambling now.’
Vladislav sat down, leaning back in his seat.
He let out a high-pitched whine.
‘If there is anything you don’t want…. I mean, you can leave it if you don’t like any of it. At least give it a try. It may take some getting used to if you’ve never had food like this before.’
Beatrice swallowed nervously, staring down at her little teacup.
Even the inside of the cup was painted with little mice, cuddling together, and offering each other flowers and hearts.
Beatrice swallowed again, reaching out to take the cup.
‘It may be hot’ Vladislav warned. ‘What am I saying. I *will* be hot. I just made it. Blow on it to cool it. I uh…I myself love my food and drink as hot as I can make it.’
Beatrice glanced up hesitantly as Vladislav picked up his teacup, the still steaming tea he drank all in a few gulps.
Vladislav put the now empty teacup down, seemingly very satisfied.
‘I may be addicted to tea you know?’ he said to her.
Beatrice didn’t know how to respond to this, and so she said nothing.
She took Vladislav’s advice, blowing on the tea a few times before taking a small sip.
‘It’s very sweet’ she mumbled.
‘Too sweet?’ Vladislav asked.
Beatrice hesitated. ‘I…don’t know.’
‘Try the scones. I hope you don’t mind sweet things; they are rather sweet too.’
‘I don’t often…I mean…. I don’t often have sweet food. I guess it’s more of a luxury. Or maybe….’
She trailed off without finishing her sentence.
Vladislav watched her quietly as she started to eat the scone, taking a small bite.

A few minutes later, Beatrice clapped her hands over her mouth, suddenly retching.
Vladislav stiffened, quickly reaching for the closest thing to hand and holding it below her chin.
Beatrice grabbed the pan, throwing up into it. Glancing up but keeping her head down, she saw Vladislav's dark robes standing before her.
Her shoulders began to tremble, and she heaved again, emptying her stomach.
When she was done, she slowly straightened, tears brimming.
'Are you ok?' Vladislav asked.
She looked up at him and he faltered, seeing her shining eyes.
'I'm sorry,' he said to her. 'This is my fault. I should have known this would be too rich for you. Or maybe you're just too anxious to eat. I'm sorry.'
Beatrice was unable to speak, overwhelmed with emotions, so much, more than she could even identify herself. She began to cry silently.
Vladislav took a napkin and wiped her mouth gently, brushing the tears from her cheek with his thumb, the fabric of his glove soft against her skin.
'Come on' he said to her, pulling her gently to her feet. 'Maybe you should lie down.'
'I'm sorry' she gasped.
'Don't be' he replied.
He led her to the next room, holding her carefully, one hand upon her elbow, the other in her hand, helping to support her.
'Just lie down here' he told her.
Vladislav knelt on the floor as she did so, and she listened to him speak his words of comfort.
Beatrice lifted her legs, resting her feet on the sofa and leaning back.
Still holding her hand gently in his own, Vladislav reached to the table beside him, grabbing the woollen blanket folded there.
He placed it over her body using his free hand.
'Rest' he said to her. 'You must be exhausted.'
Beatrice shivered, rubbing at her eyes.
Vladislav stared at her, with the orbs in the sockets of his animal-skull, ever unblinking.
He touched her face again, not to brush away a tear, but to trace the patterns in her skin.
'You truly are beautiful' she spoke quietly, 'do you know that?'
She said nothing, simply stared back at him.
Vladislav let go of her hand finally, rising to his feet and leaving the room, silently gliding away.

## Chapter Three
## The Contract

Beatrice lay on the sofa, eventually falling asleep.
When Vladislav returned, he stood in the doorway for a time, simply staring into the room.
She looked so peaceful.

He watched her for about a minute, thinking silently to himself, before turning and drifting away.

Beatrice woke up about an hour or so later. She opened her eyes, feeling a little confused at first. Her dreams had been vivid, and she had dreamed of being in a different place entirely. She didn't know where she was at first, though it gradually all came back to her.
Beatrice slowly sat up.
Seconds later, Vladislav entered the room.
'I'm glad you're awake' he said to her. 'Are you feeling better?'
Beatrice stared at him silently, her eyes were wide.
She looked down at what he was holding.
It was a steaming bowl of something.
'I made you something else to eat' Vladislav said, 'this should be easier on your stomach.'
He approached her, kneeling beside her and offering the bowl, taking the white napkin that lay across his forearm and draping it over her knees.
'It's rice' Vladislav told her. 'With chicken and carrot. The food I gave you before was far too rich. I'm sorry. This will be better for you. Something a little more bland.'
'Oh' Beatrice muttered, seeming to not know what else to say.
'Have you had nothing like this before?' Vladislav asked. 'What would you normally eat? I mean…what did your family…. uh…hm.' He began to emit a high-pitched whine.
'That sound again' Beatrice said. 'You're embarrassed.'
'Even more so when you point it out so candidly.'
'What is *candidly*?'
'Ah. It means….to be blunt, honest, maybe a little sharp.'
'Is that a bad thing?' Beatrice asked.
'Not at all. Well…I suppose it might be if you have particularly sensitive emotions, if you are delicate.'
'I'm not delicate.'
'Oh no no' Vladislav hastened, 'I never meant to imply you were.'
He rose to his feet again, towering over Beatrice, casting a great shadow over her form. It was like the sun had just been blocked from the world.
Beatrice could not help but shrink a little from him.
'Would you like a drink of water?' he asked her.
'I…'
Vladislav left her side.
'I'll be right back' he told her, his voice was soft and tender. His footsteps muffled thuds on the carpeted floor as he walked away.
Beatrice looked back down at the bowl she had been presented, placed on her lap now, she felt the warmth through her thin dress.
It was somewhat comforting, and she found solace in that, despite everything being so unfamiliar to her.
She thought that maybe, just maybe, she might like it here. She thought that maybe, she might even like her new master.
'No' she whispered to herself. 'He said he wants me to be his equal.'
The bowl on her lap began to feel hot against her skin, and she took it in her hands, lifting it from her lap.

Beatrice glanced about her, wondering where she might be able to place the bowl instead.
She opted to placing it beside her, on the sofa where she sat.
Beatrice rose to her feet, wanting to stretch her legs.
She stood on her tip toes, reaching straight up towards the ceiling and groaning. It felt nice, a few of her bones in her spine and below her waist clicked. But it felt good.
Beatrice relaxed again, dropping her arms, and letting out a deep sigh.
She reached down to the napkin that had fallen to the floor, picking it up and placing it on the arm of the sofa.
When she looked up again, Vladislav was standing in the doorway, a glass of water in his hand.
'You move very quietly' Beatrice voiced, 'for a figure so…'
Vladislav waited for her to finish her sentence, but she never did.
He approached her, descending the single step into the room, and placing the glass on a round table beside the sofa, moving a large plant-pot out of the way to do so, placing it on the floor instead.
He straightened then, standing tall and proud.
'You stink.'
'Excuse me?' she said.
'I'm sorry' Vladislav dipped his head, placing a hand to his chest and giving a slight bow. 'I wasn't sure how else to say it.'
'I…' Beatrice began, '…think you are probably right' she finished awkwardly, not knowing what else to say. 'The slaves master only allowed us to be given a quick wash before the auction.'
'I see' Vladislav nodded. 'Well.' He stepped back. 'I shall run a bath for you. Please eat at your own pace, leave whatever you don't want to eat, and come upstairs when you are ready.'
He turned and left the room once more, quickly slipping out of sight.
He was gone, and silence instantly descended within the room.
Beatrice stared at the open doorway for a few moments, seeing the place Vladislav had last stood.
She turned her head slowly away, tilting it to the side.
Beatrice looked to the room she was in, seeing it properly for the first time. It was a small room, directly opposite her, was a set of doors, with 15-panes on each door, and painted white.
Just beyond could be seen a small patio, the only thing upon this small space, was a metal wheelbarrow. The tray was painted yellow, and the legs and handles were red, though was rusted and faded in places. Within the tray, grew several sorts of plants. Beatrice could not identify them, but she could tell, though she knew nothing of plants of any sort, that they were of different kinds. Some of them grew tall, others spilled over the edge of the tray.
She could see as she continued to observe at the edges of the small patio, were smaller bushes, dotted with colourful flowers, like that which grew within the wheelbarrow. There were yellows and reds and purples and pinks.
Beatrice realised, as her attention drifted back into the room where she sat, the abundance of plant-life here also. Like the outside, these were all of varying sorts. Some with flowers, others with only leaves of different shapes, tall and thin or wide, some rounded. There was even a shelf of what looked like fully grown trees, though they were miniature in size. Beatrice did not know this, but these were Bonsai trees, their growing and care was considered to be an artform. They came from distant lands, and the special techniques to grow them began hundreds of years ago.

Beatrice also noticed a narrow mirror hanging upon the wall, reflecting back the rest of the room. Beatrice could not see herself in the reflection from the angle at which she sat, but she could see, that something about the room's reflection seemed off. She didn't know what it was. There was nothing sinister about it, it just gave her a strange feeling. And so, she rose to her feet, approaching the mirror.
She touched the glossy surface, a slow realisation dawning on her as she drew closer.
It was a painting. It wasn't a mirror at all, but an incredibly realistic painting of the room in which it resided.
'Did *he* do this?' Beatrice uttered to herself, glancing over her shoulder.
She took in the room once more, standing at this new perspective.
It was a comfortable room, a place that felt safe and homely, despite being unfamiliar to her.
Perhaps Beatrice had already began to feel like she was settling in at this place, despite being here for only a short time. Maybe it was that, or maybe it was being shown true kindness, being treated with tenderness, being allowed to sleep on a soft surface with a warm blanket. Being given food, good food, for a second time, after the first she was given had made her sick.
If she had rejected food like that where she had come from, she would have been made to go hungry. As well as suffering punishment.
Beatrice drifted away, heading towards the hallway, stepping into it. Here she saw the doorway where she had entered this home, where the doe had entered the home, so casually, before wandering out again.
Beatrice found it strange that the door had been left open all this time, and wondered if she should close it, though decided against it in the end. She didn't want to change anything in the home that she felt was not her place to change.
Beatrice headed upstairs, the stairs was easy to find, being visible from the front door.
When she reached the top step, Beatrice paused, looking around. It was more spacious up here than on the ground floor, the walls and floor made from dark wood. Emarald-green carpets muffled Beatrice's footsteps as she ventured forward.
She heard the sound of water nearby, just in the other room. It sounded like water being disturbed, like a hand moving through a body of water.
She stepped into the room, and saw a bath there. The sounds she had been hearing instantly ceased, leaving behind a comfortable silence. The tub she saw before her was wooden, and filled nearly to the top. The surface was bubbly. None of the water could be seen. The room in which the tub sat, had stone floors, but was kept warm by the sunlight that shone through the large windows. But the glass was warped, so the light could penetrate through, but nothing clear could be seen inside or out. Only vague shapes and colours.
The rest of the room was bare. There was a plain wooden cupboard against one wall, a tiny keyhole could be seen in the door, but the door was left ajar. From where Beatrice stood, she thought she could see what looked like white towels piled up inside.
The only other thing she could see within the room, was a little bundle on the floor near the tub. Beatrice approached it, kneeling and touching it.
On top was a white towel. She was struck by how soft it felt.
Beneath this, was something else. Beatrice lifted it up, looking over it briefly.
'I suppose' she mumbled to herself under her breath, 'that this is what I am expected to wear once I am clean.'
She rose to her feet again, turning towards the door.

Beatrice noticed there was no lock on it, instead she just pushed it closed, before moving back towards the tub.
Beatrice lifted her hands, slipping the dress down her shoulders and lowering it to the floor, before stepping out of it. She climbed into the tub. The water was comfortably warm, and felt so good against her skin.
She let out a sign, leaning back against the edge, allowing her body to relax.
It felt so good. Incredible.
Beatrice took a little handful of bubbles, putting it on her nose, before blowing it away, purely for amusement and fun, and nothing else.
There was a little wooden box hanging off the edge of the tub, held up by two curved hooks. Inside was a body brush, its bristles were soft.
Beatrice reached for it, running her fingers over the bristles, before beginning to clean herself, starting with beneath her nails. She had not realised how dirty she was until she stopped and took a closer look. Until just now.
Beatrice sat up, her naked shoulders and breasts now above the water. She reached behind her awkwardly, trying to clean the centre of her back. She paused, seeing upon the wall above her head, another body brush, this one with a longer handle.
Beatrice reached for it, and began to clean her back, rubbing the dead skin away.
She froze when she heard a muffled disturbance, gentle thuds that sounded like footsteps.
Beatrice dropped both brushes, shrinking back beneath the water, hiding herself under the bubbles.
She looked around. The door opened, pushed gently inwards, and a figure, the tall figure of Vladislav entered.
He walked near the tub, pausing.
Beatrice stared up at him with large eyes. Vladislav stood frozen, facing ahead of him as he stood with his side to the tub. Then he leant down, patting the floor at his feet.
Beatrice realised he couldn't see, and as Vladislav shifted to the side slightly, she saw that within the socket of his eye, there was no light.
Curiously, Beatrice leaned forwards, tilting her head.
She glimpsed his other eye, and saw there was a light there.
Vladislav noticed her, turning his head away.
'Excuse me' he mumbled, continuing to pat the floor. 'I hate mess. I feel the need to clean. Ah!' he found what he was looking for, which was Beatrice's old dress. 'There it is. I shall throw this away. I'm sorry to bother you. I shall leave now' he said, rising to his feet, and turning his body away from her, showing only his back.
'What happened to your eye?' Beatrice asked him.
'M-my eye?'
'Only one is glowing' Beatrice said.
Vladislav turned his head towards her, and Beatrice could see both his eye sockets now.
They were empty.
'You're closing your eyes' she realised.
Vladislav turned away.
'I will be downstairs' Vladislav said to her, 'working on something. Please excuse any noise you may hear; I will try to be as quiet as I can though.'
Beatrice blinked curiously at him, and he left the room, pulling the door shut behind him.
Beatrice sat back in the tub, pondering to herself the curiousness of her situation.

She fumbled around the tub, searching for the brushes she had dropped.
Finding them, she continued to wash until she felt clean.

## Chapter Four
## Possessions

Beatrice fumbled around the bottom of the tub, finding the plug and pulling.
The water slowly drained as Beatrice began to dry herself, before dressing. The clothing that had been offered to her seemed new. Perhaps this was what Vladislav bought from that shop after he had purchased her. Beatrice thought that this was most likely.
Vladislav had kept her close after he had purchased her, but in her nervous state, she had barely been aware of much going on around, and had kept her head down, trying to remain obedient and docile. She did not know what her new master might expect of her at that point, and she did not want to annoy or anger him, in case he was cruel.
First, there was stretchy under-garments that fit her waist and chest. Then there was a thin under-dress that was frilled at the sleeves and neck. Atop of this, was another dress that Beatrice put on, of more substantial material, stretchy in all directions and light-beige in colour, with dark-beige imprints of flower patterns all over. Finally, on top of this Beatrice put on a pinafore dress. Worn as an overgarment, a pinafore, the word pinafore coming from the words 'pinned' and 'afore,' was worn to protect the clothing underneath. Maids wore it like an apron, children would wear these sometimes to help protect their clothes when they played. They were pinned on the front, easily removed, washed, and replaced.
Beatrice felt her body all over, shifting her joints and limbs, feeling herself in these new clothes, and familiarising herself with these new sensations. Physically she felt incredible, and smelled incredibly pleasant and fresh, though she could not identify the scent. She felt clean, her hair was washed and damp now. Beatrice stood there for a moment, thinking, considering.
She realised at that moment, that she felt good. Happy even. Though she did not smile.

She went downstairs to find Vladislav working on something under the staircase.
There was a little unused space here, unused save for a few potted plants, of course.
Vladislav had cleared the space, and was building something in this gap.
'It's a bed' Vladislav declared proudly, hearing her approaching. 'Or at least it will be when I am finished. I will try to be as quick as I can. Regardless, it will surely be finished before nightfall.'
He looked at her properly now, taking in her new appearance.
'You were able to put on all the clothes correctly?' he asked her.
'Of course.'
'Well…I wasn't sure if…' Vladislav began to emit a high-pitched whine. 'I asked the lady for something suitable, and she gave me several pieces. And some extras.' Vladislav turned his head away, towards a point in hallway near the still open front door.
Here Beatrice saw a simple pale-wooden box.

‘Those are yours’ Vladislav explained. ‘What is inside I mean. And the box too of course. There are several different things in there for you. I wasn’t sure what to get, so I bought everything the lady in the shop suggested.’
‘Mine?’ Beatrice echoed. ‘This box is mine?’ she pointed to it.
‘Yes. The box is yours. A-and everything in it. At the moment it’s only clothes’ he explained, as Beatrice went over to it.
She knelt. It was the kind of box that had a sliding lid, and was made of cheap wood.
Opening it, she saw more garments inside, shuffling through, she noticed many white-coloured items. Some more undergarments, under-dresses, pinafores, and another dress like the one she wore now that was beige, a dress to be worn on top of the other clothing, but under the pinafore. This one was a pale mint-green in shade, and had a darker pattern of leaves all over. The two dresses, the one she held now, and the one she wore, were different colours, and patterns, but were in the same shape and style.
‘The lady in the shop said that she makes all the dresses herself’ Vladislav said. ‘It’s a family-run business, so I was told. Her mother taught her how to work with fabrics, how to run the shop, as her grandmother taught *her*.’
Beatrice lowered the dress back into the box.
‘She has a daughter, about twelve years old I think’ Vladislav continued. ‘I didn’t see her, apparently, she is quite shy, but she loves to make skirts and petticoats. She hasn’t worked on any large dresses yet. The lady of the shop also has a son, but he’s not interested in the shop. He’s more interested in what his father’s business is. Oh, listen to me rambling on. I nearly forgot; I have something else for you.’ Vladislav looked about him, reaching for a box behind him, ‘ah. Here.’ He placed the box before him, and Beatrice reached for it.
Inside there were several more items of clothing. Beatrice recognised these as night-dresses. They were short-sleeved, and the material was light and airy.
‘They’re made of cotton’ Vladislav told her. ‘They will be very comfortable to sleep in. I’ll also prepare a mattress and sheets and a pillow. The nights are comfortable here, at this time of year it is not cold at all. Though come winter, my home…*our* home’ he corrected himself, ‘will be lovely and warm. There will be fires throughout, in many of the rooms.’
As he spoke, Beatrice lifted one of the night-dresses, there were several. The one she had chosen was lilac in colour, with no pattern. The skirt reached past the knees.
‘These are mine?’ Beatrice asked.
‘Yes, these are yours.’
‘These are my possessions?’ Beatrice pressed. ‘*I own* these.’
Vladislav began to emit a hissing sound, but there seemed to be no malicious intent behind this expression. It seemed to be a friendly gesture of some sort.
‘You own these clothes’ he clarified. ‘They are entirely yours. And you can do with them what you please.’
Beatrice clutched the night-dress to her chest, tears shimmering in her eyes.
‘I’ve never had possessions before’ she breathed.
‘I’m sorry I didn’t hear what you said.’
Beatrice raised her head. When she looked around at Vladislav, her eyes were clear.
‘I said *thank you*.’ She told him.
‘You are most welcome’ he said, his eyes suddenly burning bright.

## Chapter Five
## The Cat and The Dog in the Field

Once Vladislav was finished making the bed, which didn't take him long, having done most of the work while Beatrice was bathing, he finished preparing her sleeping corner. With a new mattress, blanket, sheets and pillows. After that, he tenderly brushed Beatrice's hair, freeing up any knots, before leaving her side to begin cooking.
Beatrice sat before a mirror now, in another room on the ground floor. She was staring at her reflection, while listening to Vladislav bustle around in the kitchen nearby.
Beatrice pursed her lips, continuing to stare at her own reflection, and her patchwork skin.
She remained in silence until Vladislav called her from the other room, only a short time later.
Beatrice raised her head, snapping out of her daze.
She rose from the seat, drifting towards the kitchen.
'There you are' Vladislav said, his voice jovial-sounding. 'I've made fish and chips; I hope that's alright.'
Beatrice approached the table, where two places were set on opposite sides. She looked down at the plates full of food, and then she noticed something else.
She sat before asking, and Vladislav moved to the other side of the table.
'What are these for?' Beatrice asked, picking up a flimsy-looking thing.
'Um. That is a napkin.' He paused. 'You use it to wipe your mouth.'
'Oh. I thought only rich people had cloth to do that. How would you clean this, it looks very thin.'
'You don't clean it. You throw it away.'
'You throw it away?'
Vladislav descended in his seat, emitting a hissing sound.
'Have I upset you?' Beatrice asked.
'Of course not. Why do you ask?'
'Well…you're hissing at me.'
'Oh.' Vladislav stopped, before emitting that sound again, one more time before falling silent.
'It means I am amused.'
'You're amused with me?'
'Um, yes,' Vladislav replied with hesitation now. 'But please don't think that I was mocking you in any way. I know we are still getting to know each other. I won't ask about your life before we met; I can tell that you're uncomfortable talking about it, but its clear to me that…we have lived very different lives.'
'Is that a bad thing?' Beatrice asked.
'Not at all' Vladislav waved at her, doing so in a calming manner, as one would do to sooth a nervous creature. 'What would be bad, is if you were to perceive it in a negative way. No matter what life you might live, it is always prudent to make the very best of your situation. That way, you will live a far happier life.'
'What is *prudent*?'
'Careful, practical, discreet, intelligent' Vladislav described. 'An action that is wise or sensible. You see, a word can have a lot of different meanings.'

‘Oh.’
‘Ours is certainly not an easy language. For example; the man wound the bandage around the wound. Another example would be; the word *accept,* which means to agree or received, as opposed to the word *except* which means to not include. There is also *bough*, the branch of a tree, and *bow,* the front of a ship, or the item that often accompanies an arrow. *Dual* and *Duel*. As in double, and to spar. *Bear* and *Bare*. As in the creature, and to be empty. The absurdity of the word *quiche* and how it’s spelled…. there are so many examples. It’s fascinating, confusing yes but…when you understand the history behind a language, you understand why things became the way they are. Ours is a mongrel language you see, made up of…what was it…. German, I think, French, Latin maybe…?’ he trailed off.
Beatrice said nothing.
‘Some of what I just said would maybe make more sense if written down of course…’ Vladislav mused. ‘That way, you would be able to see the spelling of the words.’
He hesitated then.
‘You… can write, can’t you?’
Beatrice went red.
‘Can you read?’
Beatrice hung her head.
‘This is excellent!’ he declared.
Beatrice glanced up at him tentatively from between the curtains of her hair.
‘This is very exciting. I’ll be able to teach you from scratch. This will be a learning experience for both of us. I can’t wait for our first lesson.’
Beatrice, not knowing what to say, decided it would be safest to continue remaining silent. And so, she just pursed her lips.
Vladislav forced himself to relax.
‘Do you like the food?’
Vladislav watched her take a few bites. She ate very delicately.
‘Yes. It’s good.’
He watched her a little longer, before picking up his own fork.
He took a piece of fish, and several chips, and opened his mouth. Beatrice could not help but stare as she saw his jaws part, the sharp teeth of his naked skull more prominent now.
She saw as the tip of the fork was pushed right to the back of his throat, enveloped by darkness, before being drawn back out again, the food now gone.
Beatrice heard strange sounds that could only be faint chewing-noises, then Vladislav swallowed.
Beatrice dipped her head, lowering her eyes and bringing her attention back to her own food.
She wondered then how exactly he functioned. Did he have teeth hidden somewhere further into his mouth? Lips perhaps?
She dared not ask. She didn’t know why, but she felt that it would be incredibly rude.
Seemingly oblivious to Beatrice’s discomfort, Vladislav continued to talk.
‘The only thing I seasoned is the chips’ he explained. ‘It just has salt. And nothing else. The fish is cod, it’s quite a bland fish.’
‘Is that a good or bad thing?’ Beatrice asked.
‘Well,’ Vladislav pondered, poking his fish. ‘That is an interesting question. Let me think about it for a moment. Hm.’
Beatrice stared at him, waiting.

‘It depends on the person’ Vladislav finally answered. ‘It’s neither a good thing or a bad thing. It depends on one’s tastes and preferences.’
‘Oh.’
‘Have you not had anything like this before?’ Vladislav asked.
‘I don’t know’ Beatrice mumbled. ‘I don’t think so.’
‘Have you had any sort of fish before?’
Beatrice thought about this. ‘Yes,’ she said after a time. ‘I’ve had mackerel before. But I didn’t really enjoy it all that much.’
‘Well, why is that?’ Vladislav asked.
‘It was um…. hmm….’ Beatrice paused, looking down at her plate. ‘I found it very strong in taste. Sort of bitter, and very oily.’
‘Ah well’ Vladislav nodded, ‘it is certainly very rich in taste, and has a very distinct flavour. But the flesh is soft and moist, with a nice sweetness to it, just a little hint. And of course it tastes salty, but I think the combination of the two, of sweet and salty, bring out a very delicious and balanced flavour.’
‘You seem to be very interested in food’ Beatrice noted.
‘I have many hobbies’ Vladislav answered. But said no more than that.

That night, Vladislav read to Beatrice, a children’s book. Beatrice wore her nightdress now, and was tucked up in bed. Vladislav as he read to her, sat on the floor beside her, leaning back against her bed, close enough for her to look over his shoulder, and see the pictures in the book, along with the large text that was the story. He began to read.
‘Today was a nice day. It was sunny. And pleasant.’ He turned the page. ‘There was a field. It was nice and green and warm. The grass was warm, warmed by the sun.’ He turned his head to the other page. ‘There was a log in the field. The log that was in the field, was very big. It was a big log.’ He turned the page again, Beatrice looking at the detailed illustrations that went alongside the text, admiring them as Vladislav continued to read. ‘On top of the log, there was a cat. There was a cat on top of the log. The cat was sleeping.’ He looked to the other page. ‘A dog came along. It was a young dog. A puppy. This puppy saw the cat, and went over to say hello…’
Vladislav continued to read the story.
It was a story, of a puppy wandering in a field, and coming across a cat, snoozing in the sun. The cat, a large ginger male, was laying on top of a large piece of wood, the trunk of a tree that had been felled and cut up into sections. One of the sections had been forgotten, left at the edge of a field, and had become the cat’s favourite spot. The puppy sees the cat, and goes over to say hello. The two species speak about how different their lives are, and learn from one another. The puppy then returns home when called home.
Months pass, and the puppy, now grown into her adult body, meets the cat again. The two become friends, and walk away together to begin that day’s adventure.
‘That didn’t make any sense’ Beatrice said once the story was over.
‘Well, there is no reason why two different species could not be friends…I mean…we’ve found each other, have we not?’
‘No, I mean…the writing……the letters. It doesn’t make sense.’

‘Don’t worry, it will make more sense when I teach you the alphabet’ Vladislav told her. ‘I just thought that reading something simple to you when you could see the words clearly would be a nice little introductory lesson before bed.’
‘There’s something else that doesn’t make sense’ Beatrice added.
‘And what is that?’
‘Well…why does the dog have four little red boots?’
‘Ah well my dear, it’s just a story.’
‘And why do you have a children’s book?’
‘Because I love books and stories of all kind.’
‘Do you have any children?’
‘Not at all.’
‘Have you ever?’
‘No, I have never been a father in any way, I have only been an adoptive figure to the wild creatures that need my help, deer, and foxes and such. I even cared for a capybara once.’
‘I don’t know what that is.’
‘It is a large rodent, almost big enough to ride.’
‘That *is* big’ Beatrice said, eyes growing large.
‘Unfortunately, I had to say goodbye to my beloved friend when he grew old enough to begin maturing. They need others of their own kind, and it was best for him to go. I do still miss him though, my little Squishy.’
‘Squishy?’
‘That was his name’ Vladislav explained, closing the book, and rising to his feet. ‘He was very cuddly and very sweet.’
‘Would you like to have any children?’
‘Maybe one’ Vladislav answered. ‘If I find the right woman to love, whom I think would make a good mother, and if the moment is right. I refuse to bring a child into a world that I can make anything less than absolutely perfect.’
‘Can you tell me more stories again?’ Beatrice asked.
‘Of course,’ Vladislav replied. ‘Perhaps again tomorrow night, or maybe sooner.’ He glanced away, before looking back. ‘The moon is bright tonight. I don’t think I will need to light a candle for you. You’re not scared of the dark, are you?’
‘No.’
‘Then goodnight my dear’ he moved away. ‘Sleep well, and come find me if you need anything, or if you are just feeling lonely or scared. I am here for you.’
Then without another word, he walked away, ascending the stairs.
Beatrice snuggled down in her blankets, staring above her as he creaked up the steps.
She listened to his fading footsteps…then silence.

## Chapter Six
## Bumbling out the door

Beatrice slept soundly, resting on her side with her hand hanging off the edge of the bed. She had barely stirred throughout the night; her new bed with fresh sheets gave her a level of comfort she had never experienced before in her life. But something woke her gradually from her slumber.
Beatrice furrowed her brow, groaning.
Something had touched her hand.
Alarmed, Beatrice opened her eyes.
Standing next to her bed, was a doe. It had been licking her hand, drawn to her by its curiosity and Beatrice's unfamiliar scent.
Beatrice gasped, sitting bolt-upright in her bed.
Alerted by the sudden movement, the deer leapt back, letting out a cry of surprise, knocking over a tall pedestal and the potted fern atop.
The pot fell over and smashed, causing the doe to cry out again, before bounding out the front door, which had been left open.
Beatrice hugged the blankets to herself, eyes wide and blinking in confusion. Not only because of the deer, but because for a moment, she had forgotten where she was.
Beatrice's eyes roved around her environment, the little nook that was her bed beneath the stairs, the corridor that was the space beside her, at the end of which…
'Beatrice…? Is everything alright?'
The voice had come from down the corridor and from inside the kitchen.
'Who is that?' Beatrice gasped for a moment, feeling a little afraid at first. She pursed her lips, beginning to tremble slightly.
'Beatrice?'
'Vladislav?' she responded.
She began to relax, letting out a deep breath and lowering her shoulders. She remembered now. She was in her new home. She had her own bed, owned a few of her own clothes, and her new master…
'No' Beatrice uttered, hearing the gentle thuds of footsteps as Vladislav approached her.
…not master…'
She looked around as she saw Vladislav coming closer.
'…friend' she finished.
'Are you quite alright my dear?' Vladislav inquired politely. 'I heard a ruckus. I hope Bumble did not scare you too much. Oh look, the fern fell over.'
He reached down to right the toppled plant.
'I shall have to sweep that up later' Vladislav pondered to himself. 'But breakfast is a priority.'
'Did you say *Bumble*?' she asked him.
'Yes, I did.'
'What is that?
'*Who*?' Vladislav corrected. 'She is that doe who just ran out the door, her name is Bumble. I found her as a fawn last year. She was born prematurely and had been abandoned by her mother. And so, I became her mother…well…father.'
'That was a different deer to the one I saw yesterday' Beatrice mumbled. 'Isn't it?'
'Yes. I think the one that came in yesterday was a stag…' he fell silent. 'Or was it?' he said beginning to doubt himself. 'There are several deer that like to come to visit. Some purely wild, others hand-reared. Anyway…' he waved his thoughts away. 'It is unimportant.'

‘How did you know which deer it was?’ Beatrice asked. ‘You were in the kitchen and out of sight.’
‘I know the sounds of my animals’ Vladislav said to her, dipping his head and placing a hand upon his chest. ‘I’ve raised many of them since they were very young. Only the ones I have raised myself are tame enough to actually come inside, since they’re familiar with my home anyway. More than one deer as a baby has slept in a box beside my bed at night, been carried down the stairs…sat at my feet while I had breakfast, been bottle-fed in my study…’
‘Oh…I see. That makes sense.’ Beatrice said awkwardly.
‘You did give Bumble quite the fright’ Vladislav said.
‘I am sorry.’
‘I know you didn’t mean to’ he spoke quickly, interrupting her before she could say more. ‘It’s not your fault, by the sound of it, she gave you a fright too.’
‘I hope I didn’t scare her too much’ Beatrice mumbled.
‘Not at all’ Vladislav waved. ‘While deer are all naturally skittish, being prey animals… the ones I’ve raised by hand never run far. Look’ Vladislav said, turning his head towards the open door, ‘there she is now.’
Beatrice glanced around, and was surprised to see a deer’s head peering around the open door at her, ears alert and eyes attentive.
‘See?’ Vladislav said. ‘No harm done.’
He took a step back.
‘I shall see you in the kitchen then’ Vladislav told her. ‘Unless you want to go back to bed.’
‘No’ Beatrice said. ‘I’m awake now. I want to get up.’
‘Excellent.’ Vladislav hissed, clapping his hands together. ‘I will see you in the kitchen then. You can change your clothes right here. I will stay in the kitchen to give you privacy.’ He was about to turn away, but paused briefly. ‘When do you have any dirty clothes, you can put them in that little basket there.’ He pointed. ‘I will empty it when need be.’
Beatrice glanced to where Vladislav indicated, seeing the basket situated at the foot of her bed.
‘Take your time’ Vladislav said before drifting away, back towards the kitchen.
Beatrice lingered there for a moment, sitting on the edge of her bed.
She looked towards the open front door, going over to close it, before beginning to undress, changing back into the clothes she had worn the day before.
Although she had only worn this beige dress for a very short time, already it had begun to feel truly like her own. She felt like she was finding a new self within her new clothes, and with help from Vladislav, felt like she was already beginning to settle in.
She went to the kitchen to find him.
‘The bathroom is further down the corridor’ Vladislav pointed, and Beatrice saw there was another doorway leading out of the kitchen, the part of the corridor she could see split into two. ‘You can brush your teeth in there.’
‘I shall do that after I eat’ Beatrice said quietly, taking a seat tentatively. ‘But um…I don’t have a toothbrush.’
‘Don’t be silly’ Vladislav told her. ‘I’ve bought you everything you need, not just a toothbrush, but several, and some brushes for your hair, and cloths and nail trimmers and…other things I cannot quite recall. You have your own little basket in there. It’s pink’ Vladislav added with delight. ‘It’s the only pink thing in that room, and everything in the basket is pink. You know how pink represents girls and blue represents boys…?’
‘When did you get those?’ Beatrice asked. ‘I never saw you buy them?’

‘While you were asleep, I went out shopping briefly. This morning in fact, early.’
Beatrice found this very peculiar.
‘Isn’t the journey to any town that sells such things, a long distance? Surely it would take a long time to get there and back.’
‘Ah, but my dear’ Vladislav told her knowingly. ‘I use magic to get to places… sometimes… when time is limited. Like this morning for example.’
Bewildered, Beatrice didn’t know what to say to this, and so she said nothing.
‘Here’ Vladislav said, offering her a napkin. ‘You know what this is yes.’
‘Oh, yes. Thank you,’ Beatrice said, taking the napkin from him gratefully. ‘Yes, I know what it is now.’
Vladislav began to hiss, Beatrice quickly recognising this gesture as amusement.
‘Did I say something funny?’
‘Not at all’ Vladislav replied quickly. ‘Well,’ he said, ‘on second thought, yes, what you said was very funny.’
‘Why?’
Vladislav pondered for a moment, before simply letting out a sigh.
‘I’ve made something for you to eat.’ He said, placing before her a small plate of buttered bread. ‘It’s bland, and should be more agreeable with your stomach. In time, you’ll get used to richer foods.’ He drew his hand back. ‘I look forward to cooking for you. You can be my little taste-tester. But you have to be honest if you don’t like something, ok?’ His eyes burned bright. ‘Otherwise, I won’t know how best to improve. Ok?’
‘Ok’ Beatrice answered quickly. Though she wasn’t exactly sure what she was agreeing to, but Vladislav seemed to be happy, and that made her happy too.

After a pleasant breakfast, in which Vladislav ate pancakes, and drank tea with Beatrice, hers with no sugar, they went outside together.
Vladislav had already tidied the kitchen, as he had told Beatrice previously, he disliked mess, and wanted to keep things tidy at all times.
‘If you are willing’ Vladislav said to her, bowing gently and placing a hand over his chest, his other one offered out for her to take, ‘I would like to take you for a walk through the gardens.’
Beatrice stared up at him in confusion, not knowing what was expected of her.
‘If you would like to explore the gardens with me’ Vladislav clarified, ‘then please take my hand and walk with me.’
‘I have a choice?’ Beatrice mumbled, quickly pursing her lips.
‘Of course my dear’ Vladislav replied, hand still extended. ‘You can refuse if you are uncomfortable, or simply if you don’t want to.’
‘I do want to’ Beatrice said, taking his hand at last in her own. ‘I want to see the gardens.’
Beatrice allowed herself to be pulled gently to her feet. Vladislav led her towards the front door.
‘I have some outdoor slippers for you’ he told her, letting go of her hand and opening a secret compartment in the wall.
It was concealed to look like the rest of the wall, but there was a hatch that slid forwards. Behind this were three simple shelves. There was an assortment of plastic slippers here.

Vladislav paused, looking down at Beatrice's feet, before facing the shelves again, reaching for one pair in particular.
'These should fit you' he told her, placing them on the floor before her.
Beatrice had been bare-foot otherwise, sleeping barefoot, walking around the home barefoot.
'You will tell me if your feet get cold' Vladislav said to her, 'won't you?'
'Yes' Beatrice said. 'They are fine now but…'
'I don't want you walking bare-foot outdoors' Vladislav told her. 'While my home is what I would consider safe, I do not have full control over the outside. There could be thorns, sharp rocks, unsuspecting insects…snakes…'
Beatrice pursed her lips.
'Nothing I can't protect you from of course' Vladislav added hastily.
Beatrice let out a sigh.
'Come now' Vladislav told her. 'Let me show you the gardens…'

## Chapter Seven
## Little Lake of Jewels

The grounds that belonged to Vladislav were vast. There was no clear border to his property, they just sort of faded away into the wilderness.
He had no neighbours, his closest were a few miles away, and Vladislav made it clear very quickly, and numerous times, how much he enjoyed the tranquillity of the countryside. The peace and solitude.
'I do of course enjoy visiting the bustling cities' Vladislav explained, 'and different towns and environments…but the wilds of nature is what my heart truly desires. It's so peaceful…so very peaceful…lovely…and so quiet.'
Vladislav caught himself then, realizing he was falling into some sort of trance.
'You really do like the countryside don't you' Beatrice noted, as she walked by his side.
'I absolutely do' Vladislav said enthusiastically. 'The only sound that really disrupts the silence, is the occasional vixen scream.'
'Scream?'
'Nothing to worry about' Vladislav added hastily, 'merely a fox. They do make some peculiar noises.'
'They do?'
'Of course.'
'They were always chased off where I used to live' Beatrice mumbled. 'To protect the chickens and geese.'
Vladislav nodded at this, before pointing a skeletal finger in one direction.
'You can see them through the trees going about their business. They don't often come into the garden. I think Jack scares them off.'
'Jack?'
'My guard dog.'

‘You have a guard dog?’ Beatrice said, her voice wavering suddenly as she glanced about her, hands clutched to her chest now. ‘It’s not dangerous, is it?’
‘Not at all.’ Vladislav reassures her. ‘When he sees you with me, he will understand that you’ve been accepted by me, and he won’t consider you an outsider.’
‘Is he running free?’ Beatrice asked. ‘Or is he chained up?’
‘He has free reign of the property. I don’t think I even own a chain or rope or anything like that. Don’t worry’ Vladislav said again, ‘he likes to keep to himself. We’ll go see him now.’
Beatrice pursed her lips, following him only reluctantly.
They traversed the grounds, and they were beautiful.
Different sorts of flowers were everywhere, bushes, little trees that Beatrice recognised as fruit trees. There were several of these, all modest in size.
Beatrice saw some pears, and apples, and other fruit she thought she could identify, like some plums.
‘I like the small trees’ Vladislav explained. ‘They look nice closer to the house. When they get a bit bigger, I like to move them to another place so they can be a part of the forest, and grow to their potential.
‘You move the trees?’ Beatrice asked as they walked.
‘Yes, I do. It’s not an easy job. I have to plan my whole day around it.’
‘Oh…’
They continued to make their way through the grounds, now following a stone path that wound this way and that. First one way around a circular flowerbed, then another way around a vegetable patch, one of several miniature ones they had passed.
Vladislav led Beatrice to a rickety fence, the gate, equally as rickety, was held closed by a single flimsy piece of string. Vladislav held the gate open for Beatrice to enter, closing it after her and following in her wake.
They came to a section of the property that was partially fenced off, but only in areas, other parts were left wide-open, the rest of the property clearly visible.
Here, there was a large pond, narrow enough in certain areas for one to jump to the other side with little trouble. The edges were lined with large flat rocks, smaller rocks paler in colour resting between the crevasses. Green areas of soft moss flourished, nestled within were patches of purple flowers, maybe lavender, Beatrice wasn’t sure.
Upon the water itself, rested circles of dark-green lily pads. A little waterfall trickled into the pond on one side, the modest stream rolling down the curved stone steps. Behind the waterfall, were large bushes, the leaves maroon in colour.
Within the water itself, Beatrice could see large fish, many large fish. Some yellow, some white, some gold, others patterned. Some were solid in colour, others were shiny.
Beatrice approached the water, seeing one of the fish drifting closer to her, it was white with small patches of grey. Another beside that one, was pure gold in colour, a very pale and shiny shade of yellow. It looked like a jewel.
‘They’re beautiful’ Beatrice uttered.
‘They are koi’ Vladislav said, leaning forwards, hands behind his back, eyes shining bright. ‘They are my pride and joy.’
‘Amazing’ Beatrice breathed. ‘They are like…they are like….’
Vladislav turned his head towards her.
‘This pond…’ Beatrice said, ‘it’s like a little lake of jewels…’
Vladislav straightened up, resuming his height, his eyes burning even brighter.

‘How long did it take for you to create all this?’
‘That is…’ Vladislav paused. ‘It has taken many years, for me to create this property as you see it today. It has changed greatly over time. When I first came here, it was empty land. There were not even any trees here, not a single one. Not in this area at least.’ Vladislav turned his great head, first one way, then the other. ‘This was a great valley’ Vladislav went on. ‘You can see on either side of us’ he indicated, lifting both his arms simultaneously, ‘the gentle slopes that surround us, were once bare. You can see the trees here now are large. I planted those trees, every single one of them. And I love them all.’ He pointed ahead of him then. ‘You can see the ocean, between the trees.’
Beatrice turned her head in an attempt to see.
But the trees blocked her way.
‘I’m afraid I cannot see’ she lamented. ‘Maybe if I were as tall as you.’
Vladislav lowered his arm.
‘In any case’ Vladislav said, ‘the most beautiful things worth seeing, are right here in my garden. Ah, look, there is another deer.’
Beatrice looked over to it.
‘I wonder how it got in.’
At that very moment, the deer leapt over the fence, with very little effort.
‘Oh’ Beatrice said.
‘There’s also several gaps in the fence’ Vladislav explained. ‘They wander freely, but always seem to come back. Even the wild ones. Not only the ones I’ve raised myself.’ He paused. ‘I would say I recognise almost all of them by sight. Although, every once in a while, a new one will appear. One I have not seen before. I like to think of those ones as curious travellers.’
‘They must feel very safe here’ Beatrice mumbled.
‘I certainly hope they do. And look’ Vladislav said, ‘there’s the guard-dog I was telling you about.’
They both looked over towards the same direction. Beatrice wasn’t sure at first what Vladislav was looking at, and then it moved.
‘That’s a dog?’ Beatrice asked.
‘It certainly is’ Vladislav answered. ‘Let’s see if he wants to come over.’ Vladislav lifted his hand, waving at the dog. ‘Here Jack! Here boy!’
The creature looked around, and Beatrice could indeed see now, that it was a dog.
The dog was very fluffy, almost bear-like, but only medium in size. It had a mane like a lion, its coat a solid cinnamon colour, and a cute and squishy face.
It looked around as Vladislav called out to it, but it did not get up, instead continued to lay there, before looking away again.
‘I should have known he would not be interested in greetings’ Vladislav sighed, lowering his hand. ‘He does like to keep to himself.’
‘I thought you said he was a guard dog’ Beatrice asked.
‘He is. And he is excellent at his job.’
Vladislav knelt down, patting the water with his hand.
Jack immediately looked up to see what the disturbance was. Realizing it was not a threat, the dog sighed heavily, going back to its resting position. It found relaxation again very quickly.
‘He may not appear to be at first, but Jack is actually alert at all times.’ Vladislav rose to a stand. ‘I even tested it a while ago. He is a very light sleeper.’
‘I’ve never seen a dog like that before’ Beatrice said.

‘He’s what’s called a chow. That is his breed. They are quiet, independent, and intelligent, more cat-like than dog-like. They come from faraway lands. They’re very common in their land of origin, here…well…’ Vladislav tilted his head. ‘He may be the only one in this kingdom, now that I think about it.’
‘You’ve travelled far then.’
‘Yes.’
Beatrice looked up at Vladislav’s skeletal head.
‘I wanted a dog to protect the koi from herons’ Vladislav explained. ‘I have lost quite a few in the past. I had another dog before, I believe she was a retriever of some kind, lovely blonde coat. But unfortunately, she wasn’t very good at guarding. Instead, she would spend most of the day swimming, and scaring the fish. Luckly the next dog I got, Jack here, has no interest in swimming.’
‘What happened to the other dog?’ Beatrice asked.
‘I ate her.’
‘What?’ Beatrice gasped.
Vladislav began to hiss.
‘I’m joking’ he told her. ‘No. ‘I gave Bessie to my neighbour.’
‘You have a neighbour?’ Beatrice asked.
‘A few miles in that direction’ Vladislav pointed vaguely. ‘She was a sweet girl, *is* a sweet girl. But I thought that she would be more suited to the home and life that *he* could give her. He, my neighbour’ Vladislav elaborated, ‘Asabourougha is his name. He likes dogs very much. I have visited them both several times since, and she seems very happy.’
‘Oh. That’s nice.’
‘Do you like dogs?’ Vladislav asked.
‘I don’t really know’ she confessed. ‘My family have never had a dog…’
She abruptly halted then, looking shocked, cheeks going a little red.
‘I know you don’t like to mention your family’ Vladislav told her in a comforting tone. ‘I’m not going to ask you about that. I just want to know what you think about dogs.’
‘Um’ Beatrice went on awkwardly, fiddling with the fabric of her dress. ‘Well…’ she took a slow breath, composing her thoughts again. ‘I’ve never had a dog or a puppy or anything. I don’t…um…’
Vladislav watched her intently, but Beatrice seemed not to know what else to say. And so, Vladislav tried to help her out.
‘They have purple tongues you know.’
‘Hu?’ Beatrice looked up at Vladislav.
‘The dogs’ Vladislav explained. ‘Him’ he pointed to Jack, who had resumed his frozen posture. ‘They have purple tongues. In their homeland, it’s said that their purple tongues ward off ghosts and evil spirits.’ Vladislav began to hiss again. ‘And since Jack arrived, I have not seen a single ghost, nor ghoul, nor wraith, nor anything else equally or slightly more-or-less unpleasant.’
Beatrice stared up at him mutely, seemingly lost for words.
‘Come’ Vladislav said, indicating for her to continue along their path. ‘Let me show you the rest of the grounds.’

## Chapter Eight
## First Lesson

Together, the unusual pair wandered the grounds, and Vladislav showed Beatrice his home, which was now hers also. And Beatrice slowly began to familiarise herself with this new place. Beatrice saw the large ox that had pulled their carriage, on the day that Beatrice was bought. It was lounging around in a meadow now, chewing grass, and looking incredibly content.
'I'm almost jealous' Beatrice said, as she stared at the bulky creature, its low-slung head hovering over the lush grass, as it chose the next spot from which to eat from. 'No worries in the world…just rest and fresh grass.' Beatrice leant forwards against the simple fence, craning her head to get a better look at him. 'Don't you think he's lonely?' she asked.
'Not at all' Vladislav replied. 'His kind are mostly solitary, no that is not true' he quickly corrected himself. 'The females and young stay in groups. The males choose to live alone. They spend most of their lives this way, until of course it's time to breed. Their horns grow larger during this time, and turn a vivid red.' He paused. 'It's truly beautiful. Unfortunately, during this time, they also become much more aggressive. Connecting him to the carriage during those times is absolutely out of the question. Lucky these times last only a few weeks, and most of the time he is a calm sweetheart. He loves carrots' Vladislav added as an afterthought.
They continued to traverse the grounds. Beatrice saw more gardens, vegetable patches, orchards separated in little clusters, meadows, areas that were kept separate for animals, like the geese. There seemed to be no pattern, no rhyme or reason to the property.
Beatrice sort of liked it this way, and found not only the grounds truly fascinating, but the interior of the home also. Everywhere, both inside the walls of the home, and outside, there were 'pieces' from all around the world. From items, to food, to living animals, like the chow named Jack.
They wandered the grounds for a long while, and all that walking was very tiring for Beatrice. She was grateful when they finally returned to the cottage once more.
'You must be hungry' Vladislav said to her.
'Yes, I am.'
'Well…I have plenty of food in the kitchen.'

Beatrice sat down at the kitchen table; in the same seat she had occupied before.
'Remind me again' Vladislav said, 'you don't have any food allergies, do you?'
'Not that I know of.'
'Wonderful!'
In no time at all, Vladislav had prepared for her a small snack of plain pancakes.
'Next time' Vladislav told her, placing the little plate before her, 'I will add some honey. But not this time. I want your stomach to adjust.' He paused. 'I'm excited to cook for you' he said. 'There's so much you have to look forward to, and I can't wait to share them with you.'
'Share with me?'
'Your first meals' Vladislav declared. 'For example,' he began, circling around her, 'I can cook a variety of different foods. Ham with brown-sugar and pineapple, cranberry-orange roast duck, mushroom-stuffed steak rolls, crab cakes, salmon. Or perhaps something vegetarian. I can

make a pear with walnut and blue cheese tart, butternut squash and cherry tomato crumble, mushrooms, peppers, all sorts of soups and stews, deserts too.'
'I've never had any of those things' Beatrice uttered. 'I've never even heard of those things.'
He hesitated. 'What sort of food are you used to?'
'Well for the morning I would…um…'
'Don't worry' Vladislav said, placing a gentle hand upon her shoulder, 'I'm not going to ask about your past or your family. I just want to know what you've eaten before.'
The action of placing his hand upon her shoulder was meant to comfort her. But instead, Beatrice felt a little uneasy at the skeletal touch.
'I'm sorry' Vladislav said, realising her discomfort. 'I should not have done that.'
He walked around the table and took a seat opposite her, steepling his hands on the table before him.
'Please' he encouraged, reaching forwards to gently push the fork on the table closer to her, before steepling his fingers again. 'Just tell me what food you typically ate before you came here.'
Beatrice pursed her lips.
She was silent for a moment, before conceding.
'In the morning, I would have porridge, and the meals in the daytime would be…vegetable stews, cheese, bread.' She paused. 'That was it really. Sometimes we had wine or beer.'
'No meat?' Vladislav asked. 'Did you not have any animals?'
'We did, but we typically sold them at the market instead of eating them ourselves. Meat is expensive. We'd only slaughter them if it was a special occasion. Like a wedding…the birth of a child.'
'I see…'
'Is it difficult making…all those meals you mentioned?' Beatrice asked him.
'Not at all. Well, not for me anyway. I love cooking, it's like creating a fine piece of art. And to see the finished results, and taste the finished results…'
Vladislav did something now that Beatrice had not yet seen him do before.
He licked his lips. Well, where his lips would have been. A long thick tongue came out and ran over his strange teeth, before slipping back down his throat and vanishing.
It had happened so quickly, that Beatrice began to doubt herself at what she had seen.
'Cooking is a real passion of mine' Vladislav went on.
'Do you…' Beatrice began, 'taste…like other people do?'
'I do' Vladislav answered. 'Maybe more so. But that's only because of my love of food. I like to try a lot of recipes, lots of different herbs and spices. Over time my palette has developed, and I can identify all sorts of different ingredients by taste with ease. What a meal needs…what its missing…'
'What's a palette?'
'It means *taste*' Vladislav told her.
'Oh.'
Vladislav dipped his head.
'Please eat' he told her gently. 'You must be hungry after all that walking.'
'What about you?'
'I will eat a little later when I've decided what I want' Vladislav replied. 'Now would you like to try a little bit of honey with your pancakes?'

They sat together for a short time at the kitchen table, until Beatrice had finished eating. This time, the food did not make her sick, and she was happy at being able to keep the food down, finishing off with a glass of water. This pleased Vladislav very much.
'Now' he said, rising to his feet. 'Would you like to come to the other room with me?'
Beatrice stared up at him with large eyes as he towered over her.
'Come to the other room?' she asked. 'What for?'
'We're going to begin your very first lesson.'
'My lesson?'
'Yes' Vladislav told her. 'I am going to teach you to read.'
'Oh, is that going to be difficult?'
'Well,' Vladislav began, offering his hand for her to take, 'that depends on you.'
She took his hand and allowed him to help her to her feet.
'Was it difficult for you to learn to read?' she asked.
'I cannot recall' Vladislav said. 'I learned to read from a very young age.'
'Can a person older than a child learn to read?' Beatrice asked, doubt laced in her voice.
'Of course,' Vladislav told her. 'You can learn at any age.'
He led her to the sitting room, a luxurious room with poofy sofas, walls lined with shelves filled with books and curiosities. Dark wood lined the floor and walls, and there were thick red and black rugs on the floors.
Against one wall, there was a stone fireplace.
Vladislav led Beatrice to the sofa, and she sunk into it.
Vladislav did not sit just yet, instead he clicked his fingers, and pointed towards the fireplace. Out of nothing, a fire sprung to life. It shone in Beatrice's eyes. Her attention fixated upon the place for a time, before turning up to stare at Vladislav.
'What did you do?'
'Nothing much' Vladislav said to her. 'Just a little bit of magic.' He bowed his head towards her. 'I am a mage after all.'
'Would I be able to do such things?'
'You could learn to read' Vladislav told her. 'You could learn many things, but magic will be something you could never master. We mages, sorcerers, witches and wizards and the like, are born different. We have certain chemicals within our bodies, energies, forces, whatever you want to call it. It works alongside the magic, and allows one to manipulate and control it.'
'Oh, I see.'
'We'll be lovely and warm with the fire now.' His head turned towards the window. 'It will be getting dark outside soon. We will be cosy in here.' He placed his skeletal hands together. 'Now' he said, 'let us begin your lessons.'
'Ok?' Beatrice said uncertainly.
'This time next year, you will be able to read and write with ease.'
'Really?'
'Absolutely, now…' he glided towards one of the bookshelves, taking a narrow book from there. 'We'll start with the alphabet.' He paused, before spinning around to face Beatrice. 'You know what the alphabet is?'
'Yes. They are the letters that make up the words.' She paused. 'Is that right?'
'Correct' he said, moving back over to her.

He descended into the sofa a short distance from her, the dark material of his cloak spreading out around him, before opening the book to the first page.
'Here' he said, leaning towards her. 'This is the alphabet.'
Beatrice looked over at the page. The letters were bold and black.
'The English language has 26 letters. These are all the letters we use in words.'
'Oh' Beatrice sighed. 'I feel overwhelmed already.'
'Don't worry about that. Like I said, this time next year, you will be doing this with ease. You just have to break down the task into smaller manageable lessons. Don't worry about tomorrow, focus only on this lesson.'
'Right.'
'Now, when reading and writing, you always start on the top line, on the left-side. So here, you would start with A. Now copy after me – A… B… C…'
'A… B… C…'

They continued the lesson for about an hour or so, before Vladislav rose to fetch them some tea.
By the time he returned however, Beatrice had fallen asleep, slumped against the arm of the sofa.
Vladislav watched her for a time, before placing the tray down upon the low coffee-table.
He took a small blanket from the side, placing it gently over her.
'Poor girl' he uttered to himself. 'You must be so exhausted; this all must be so much to take in.'
He sat back on the sofa, leaning back and craning his head towards the ceiling.
Vladislav let out a sigh, before the lights in his eyes went out.
He remained sleeping for a time, until a short-sharp scream woke him up.
Vladislav opened his eyes, sitting up. He turned towards Beatrice.
'Are you alright?'
'There's a noise' Beatrice said, her voice trembling, 'a demon outside.'
'Demon?'
'Listen' Beatrice hissed, eyes wide and darting about. 'It came from outside.'
Vladislav froze, listening intently.
A few moments later, that sound that had spooked Beatrice occurred again.
'Ah.' Vladislav relaxed. 'That is nothing to worry about. That is merely a fox.'
'A fox?'
'Did you not have them where you once lived?'
'No' Beatrice shook her head, clutching the blanket to her chest. 'They were chased away, hunted…we had dogs that stayed close to the barns, they would protect the chickens and other animals.'
'I see' Vladislav said. 'Do you remember, I told you earlier today, that the only noise that disturbs the peace in the countryside here, is the sound of the fox. The vixen scream. I assure you, there is nothing to be afraid of. It's perfectly normal. You will likely hear it again, and many times in the future.'
'What is it?' Beatrice asked, 'why do they make such a terrible noise?'
'It's a mating call' Vladislav told her calmly, rising to a stand and offering his hand to her once more. 'Come on, you should go to bed to rest properly.'

A short time later, Beatrice was wearing a teal-coloured nightdress. The new item of clothing felt so clean and fresh.
She lay back in bed, the sheets cool and comforting against her skin.
'Beatrice…' Vladislav whispered to her, kneeling beside her bed, 'I want you to be happy here, please tell me if there is anything more I can do to make you happy.'
'No' Beatrice uttered. 'You've been very kind to me, and I cannot ever repay your kindness.' She paused. 'But there is one thing…'
'The contract?' Vladislav responded.
'Yes.' Beatrice gave a nod. 'It seems we're on the same thought.'
'You said the seller has a copy.'
'That's right.'
'What if…' Vladislav began, 'I was able to obtain the seller's copy of the contract?'
'You could do such a thing?' Beatrice gasped.
'Yes,' Vladislav bowed his head, the lights in his eyes going out for a moment, as he slowly blinked. 'I could find the person who owned you before me, the seller, and destroy the copy of the contract that he has.' He paused. 'How would that make you feel?'
'That would…' Beatrice fumbled, '…that would be wonderful. There would be no evidence at all that I was ever owned. That would…' she broke off again, thinking about her words, '…that would make me very happy.'
'Then it shall be done.'
Vladislav rose to his feet, towering over Beatrice. But she felt completely relaxed.
'I will go now' he told her. 'Sleep, rest, and worry about nothing. You are welcome to wander this home as you wish. Just please, stay inside during night-time if you will. There are no dangers here, but the landscape is still unfamiliar to you, and I wouldn't want you to get lost or hurt.'
'I…think I will stay in bed' Beatrice told him. 'I would not feel safe leaving when I know you're not close-by.'
'I shan't be long' Vladislav assured her, drifting towards the front door.
'It's a long way to travel to where you found me' Beatrice told him. 'How will you get there so soon.'
'Magic' he told her. 'Of course.'
He opened the front door.
'Please' he said, as he stepped outside, 'rest.'
He closed the door quietly behind him.

Beatrice fell asleep quickly after that, feeling happy, safe, and comfortable.
She was woken the next morning when Vladislav returned to her.
'Here' he said, handing her a sheet.
Beatrice looked over it, seeing that it was a contract of ownership. It had her name on. It was the sellers copy.
'This is what you wanted, wasn't it?' he asked.
'Yes' she gasped in disbelief.
'Then follow me.'
Vladislav walked outside, Beatrice echoing his footsteps.

The mage held the sheet in his hands, and before her very eyes, the paper burst into flames, burning bright and fast, before being reduced to ash that blew in the wind. Wind that was summoned by Vladislav.
'You can even control the weather' Beatrice gasped. 'You can even control the elements.'
Vladislav turned to face her, letting out a slow breath, showing nothing of his emotions and thoughts.
'Let's go back inside' he said. 'I will make you breakfast.'

## Chapter Nine
## Settling

Vladislav made her breakfast, something a bit different this time. He made for himself a full breakfast, of eggs and bacon and sausage and mushroom and black pudding and beans and toast. His plate was stacked up high. A second plate was offered to Beatrice. Her's smaller, with a little bit of everything.
'Please eat slowly' he told her, pouring a glass of orange juice for her. 'It may be delicate on your stomach if you are not used to it.'
'I understand.'
Vladislav descended into the chair, sitting opposite from Beatrice at the table.
Beatrice raised her eyes to Vladislav, watching as he reached out to take his fork. For the second time, Beatrice saw Vladislav's great tongue, slipping out of his mouth.
He ate the food delicately. Beatrice realised that without lips, this is how he consumed food. His tongue was sticky, collecting the food with ease and swallowing it.
Beatrice blushed at this; she didn't know why exactly though. She had never seen such a thing, and did not know what to think or how to feel about it. But she felt that maybe she should not be staring.
Beatrice looked down at her own plate. The food looked good. It smelled delicious too.
She picked up her cutlery, cutting her egg into smaller pieces, and began to eat slowly.

After this, once both of them had finished, Vladislav cleared the kitchen. Then they went out to the garden again, and Vladislav began to talk about his flowers, but now in greater detail.
'Many of these flowers do not occur naturally in this part of the world, but far in other lands. I am hoping to bring them to these healthy lands, and make it so that they can survive on their own, not just within my garden.' He paused, stepping back and withdrawing his hand from the plant he had been caressing. 'That is my purpose.'
'Your purpose?' she asked.
Vladislav turned to her, his glowing eyes within their dark sockets revealing nothing.
'I have had many interests come and go throughout the years. Music, rearing horses, breeding them, breaking them, selling them, dancing, acting, astrology, art, especially hyper-realistic paintings, which can take months to complete a single piece, but the finishing result is absolutely worth the effort…and while I have never lost interest or love for those things, I have pursued a dilettante interest in many hobbies over the years.'

‘Dilettante’ Beatrice repeated, ‘I’ve never heard that word before.’
‘It means to take a surface interest in many things, without real commitment or knowledge, and while I do like to focus on some things, there are many more things I like to dabble in.’
‘Oooh’ Beatrice said. ‘I’ve only been here for a short time and I have learned another word already.’ She paused. ‘I feel like I am learning so much so quickly. It’s sort of overwhelming.’
‘Please let me know if you need a rest’ Vladislav said to her. ‘The mind needs a break just as much as the body does.’
Beatrice gave a nod, indicating that she understood. And Vladislav gave a nod to her in return, before turning away.
He reached for one of the flowers beside them, plucking it from its stem and handing it to her. Beatrice took it gratefully.
‘That is a black calla lily’ Vladislav told her. ‘It’s very rare, especially the black ones. They come in several colours. The flower comes far from the south, very difficult to find. I had to travel to their homeland to get these. Unfortunately,’ he said, turning back to the rest of the flowers growing from the raised bed, ‘it is very difficult for me to keep them alive for very long. Most of the rare and foreign flower I have brought here from other parts, all die in a few weeks and months. I feel like I need to replicate their home-environment and climate more precisely. Perhaps the type of soil is not right for them. Or maybe it’s the water. Maybe it’s too cold…it could be any number of things. This is a riddle I have yet to solve. But I won’t give up.’
‘So strange’ she muttered then.
‘What’s strange?’
Beatrice brought the flower to her lips then, smelling it.
‘I can’t really imagine you dancing’ she admitted.
‘I am actually quite graceful’ Vladislav told her. ‘Maybe’ he added, ‘we could dance together someday.’
Beatrice’s eyes went wide at that, and she blushed, turning her head away.
‘I…don’t know how to dance.’
‘Neither did I’ Vladislav told her, leaning over her and taking the black flower gently from her hand. ‘But we all start from nothing’ he went on, lifting the flower in the air before him. ‘Even the tallest mountain started as a stone.’
The flower began to glow then, its trumpet-shape opening further as it became engulfed in a white light, before breaking into many tiny pieces, and floating away. Like ash on the wind.
‘Everything lives and dies’ Vladislav spoke in a distant voice. ‘Eventually, all things come to an end.’ His voice sounded sombre as he spoke, but as he looked to Beatrice once again, his voice was light and cheery. ‘Let me show you the rest of the garden. I hope my talk of flowers isn’t boring you at all.’
‘N-no, not at all.’ Beatrice pursed her lips. ‘I…I just don’t know anything about flowers really. The only thing I know about is the crops and vegetables we used to grow. I want to learn about everything in this garden. I want to learn all their names…how to identify them…’
‘Excellent’ Vladislav said, making a flourishing motion with his hands. ‘Then I will be happy to tell you all that I can remember about my little petaled creations.’
‘Can I ask you something?’
‘Of course.’
‘How do you get these flowers? You travel?’
‘By magic’ Vladislav finished. ‘Of course.’

‘Oh right.’
‘Let us not talk about magic now’ Vladislav asked of her. ‘It is a very complicated subject. But yes, I use portals of magic to travel great distances with ease. Although, a carriage can be enjoyable too. Sometimes, it’s nice to just take in the scenery. I’m not always in a rush to get to my destination. They say the journey is more important after all…’
Vladislav indicated for Beatrice to follow him, and they continued through the grounds together.
He showed her how to tend to the animals, what they needed in terms of care on a daily basis, their feed, grooming, healthcare, bedding, and their personal needs and preferences.
‘He likes to be scratched just behind the ears’ Vladislav told Beatrice, standing beside the ox, and reaching through the fence. ‘He might look scary to some’ Vladislav went on, ‘but he is a big sweetheart.’ He continued to scratch. ‘If you get just the right spot, he begins to sing.’
At that moment, the ox began to groan, before letting out a single bellow, flicking his ears.
After that, they visited the vegetable patch.
‘I grow everything I need here, and more. Anything spare I sometimes sell, give to the animals, or give to my neighbour.’ He paused, kneeling down at a certain point, reaching his hand out and brushing the green plants that were sprouting from the soil.
‘The carrots are very popular amongst the animals’ Vladislav spoke casually. ‘It’s like a treat for them, they like the sweet taste. And I take great pleasure in working in my garden, and watching the vegetables grow. I have to use gloves of course, not these gloves’ he added, raising his hand and flexing his fingers before his face, ‘but my special gardening gloves. I can’t have damp and dirt getting between my joints. That would be most uncomfortable indeed.’
As Vladislav knelt in the dirt, Beatrice looked over at him. It was odd seeing him at this lower stance, and she gazed over his horns now. They were symmetrical, long and curved towards the ends.
A curious inclination took over Beatrice suddenly, and she reached a hand towards Vladislav, her fingers brushing one of the horns.
Vladislav immediately jerked his head away, the abrupt movement causing Beatrice alarm.
Vladislav turned his skull-head to face her, rising slowly to his feet. Beatrice took a step back, drawing her hands towards her chest.
‘I…’ she fumbled. ‘I’m sorry.’
‘You should not have done that’ Vladislav said to her calmly.
‘I just…wanted to know what they felt like.’
Vladislav began to whine, the high-pitched screech sounding like a boiling kettle.
He lifted his hand then, pointing a finger to the centre of her.
‘If I were to touch your breasts, how would that make you feel?’
Beatrice went red then, pursing her lips.
‘I’m so sorry’ she told him. ‘I didn’t know.’
‘Pay it no mind’ Vladislav said, taking a step away.

At noon that day, they returned to the home to have some tea, where Beatrice indulged in some cakes, before resting to digest and taking part in another lesson with Vladislav where she practiced writing for the first time. Starting with her name. She mastered it very quickly, feeling very achieved. Vladislav congratulated her with more tea and cakes.

Beatrice continued her lesson by practicing the alphabet, from start to end, writing in both capital letters, and lower case. Gradually she began to familiarise herself with them. It felt to her, like making new friends. And she liked that feeling.

## Chapter Ten
## Chicken Alfredo

Later that day, when the time came, Vladislav cooked dinner for Beatrice.
She sat in the kitchen patiently, waiting for her meal to arrive, watching him move about the kitchen. If she had been familiar with such a concept, this would have been like waiting for a meal at a restaurant.
After not too long, her meal arrived.
'It's chicken alfredo' Vladislav offered. 'It's a pasta dish, with chicken, of course. For me it's a comfort meal, and easy enough to make. It's made with a creamy cheese-sauce.' He straightened up. 'I hope you like it.'
Beatrice looked down at her wide bowl, seeing before her the gentle colours of the chicken and creamy pasta. She lifted her cutlery, cutting a small piece for herself and lifting it to her mouth. Vladislav watched her closely as she did this.
Beatrice began to chew, doing so slowly, giving her mind time to process this strange new taste, and gradually coming to the conclusion of how it tasted, and whether or not she liked it.
'Hm' she said, as Vladislav continued to watch her expectantly.
'What do you think?' he pressed.
'I um…like it.'
'You do?' Vladislav's eyes began to glow. 'That's excellent' he declared, reaching into his coat and pulling out a little book and a pen.
He opened it, and began to scribble into it.
'Chicken alfredo' he mumbled to himself as he began to write, Beatrice watching him with curiosity, 'what do you like about it exactly?'
'Um…' Beatrice pondered her words. 'Its…creamy….' She settled on, 'and um, tastes of cheese, in a nice way.'
'…tastes of cheese in a nice way' Vladislav murmured. 'Remember' he said to her, speaking clearly now, 'I need an honest opinion of the food if I'm to find tastes that are to your liking. You understand?'
'I do.'
'Excellent.' Vladislav snapped the little book shut, returning it and the pen, to the inside of his coat pocket. 'Now, if you would be so willing my dear, could you help me clear the table?'
'You're asking me?' Beatrice blurted.
'Of course.' Vladislav paused. 'Is that so odd?'
'I suppose I'm not used to it.'
'How long have you been a slave?' Vladislav asked her.
Beatrice pursed her lips, bowing her head.
'I'm sorry' Vladislav said. 'Was that question uncomfortable for you?'
'Umm…mmm.'

‘You don’t have to answer’ Vladislav clarified. ‘Pretend I did not ask.’
She raised her head, looking him in his glowing eyes.
‘I would love to help you clear up’ Beatrice said. ‘You could show me where everything belongs.’

Moments later, Vladislav handed something to Beatrice to put into the next room, where there was a little pantry. And that is when Beatrice was met by something that caught her by shock and surprise. She had almost walked directly into it.
Beatrice let out a cry, falling back and dropping what she had been carrying.
Vladislav was behind her in an instant.
‘What’s wrong?’
‘*What is that?*’ Beatrice cried. ‘It’s upside down!’
It was a single large fruit bat, staring innocently back at Beatrice.
‘It’s just a single fruit bat’ Vladislav said to her. ‘It is rather large for its size, but they are normally quite large.’
Vladislav helped Beatrice to her feet.
‘There is no need to be afraid’ Vladislav said. ‘I think they’re rather sweet.’ He paused. ‘Would you like to feed him some banana? He loves banana.’
‘What?’ Beatrice gasped.
‘Here’ Vladislav went to the nearby cupboard, taking a bunch and pulling one free.
Instantly the bat’s eyes grew massive, grew hungry.
Vladislav peeled the banana, tearing off a piece and offering it to the creature.
The bat ate it whole, stuffing it in its mouth and eating loudly, its little pointed tongue poking out as its cheeks bulged.
‘Would you like to feed him?’ Vladislav offered.
Beatrice stepped forward tentatively, taking the banana piece from Vladislav and offering it to bat.
The creature ate hungrily, stuffing its already bulging mouth.
‘He seems hungry.’
‘He’s always like that’ Vladislav replied. ‘I assure you he is very well fed.’
‘Does he live here?’ Beatrice asked. ‘Here in this pantry?’
‘Yes. He is free to come and go whenever he likes’ Vladislav indicated the large open window beside them. ‘It’s lovely’ he said moving over to it. ‘It lets a lovely breeze in but its sheltered enough to keep the rain out.’
‘But doesn’t the food get stolen?’ Beatrice asked.
‘By who?’ Vladislav cocked his head towards her. ‘There is no one else for miles around, and there is nothing worth stealing here.’
‘What about all your books?’
‘Hardly worth much to a criminal or thief’ Vladislav replied waving her off. ‘And anything that *is* worth stealing…well…’ he paused. ‘No one but I would know either its worth or what to do with it. Apart from that’ he added cheerfully, ‘Jack keeps the grounds safe; and will alert to any unwanted guest.’

## Chapter Eleven
## Beach

That night, Beatrice was gently woken by Vladislav's voice, speaking softly to her.
She opened her eyes, sitting up.
Vladislav was kneeling beside her bed, holding a lantern in his hand.
'Come with me' he said, 'I want to show you something.'
Beatrice took his hand, allowing herself to be led up the stairs through the dark home, guided ever higher, following the dim light Vladislav held above her.
He brought her to a narrow doorway, Beatrice initially thought to be a cupboard, but opening it, Beatrice saw behind it there was a steep set of steps.
'This is the only place I have not shown you yet' Vladislav said. 'I was waiting for the right moment, and tonight is a beautiful cloudless night.'
He climbed the stairs ahead of her, opening a small hatch above and climbing through.
Beatrice felt a chilly breeze, hearing the rustling of the leaves beyond.
She tilted her head upwards, seeing stars overhead.
'Come,' Vladislav spoke softly down to her, reaching through the hatch, offering his hand for her to take. 'It's perfectly safe up here.'
Vladislav helped her climb, supporting her as she ascended the steps, coming through modest gap.
Beatrice found herself standing on the roof of the home, gazing about her.
They were standing upon a tiny balcony now.
Vladislav lay down a thick blanket for them both, and here, together, they began to stargaze.
Vladislav told Beatrice all about the stars and constellations, and Beatrice cried tears of joy, disbelief at how much her life had changed so quickly for the better.
When Vladislav asked her why she shed these tears, Beatrice explained exactly.
She told Vladislav that she had never seen the stars before. Because she had spent so much time looking down, because she was scared, mistreated, and avoidant. Never wanting to make eye contact with anyone, and speaking only when spoken to.
She had been so caught up in her self-pity, that she had never seen the beauty of the world around her. She cried now because of how wonderful life can be, and at the same time, she grieved for the time she had wasted, too selfish and caught up in her own misery.
It was at that moment, as they lay side by side, that Beatrice reached out to take Vladislav's hand, doing so for the first time of her own accord.
'Even your hand is skeletal under the glove' Beatrice uttered, causing Vladislav to emit a high-pitched whine, feeling a little embarrassed suddenly.
'Even your hand is skeletal' Beatrice said for the second time, though this time it sounded like she was talking more to herself. Her voice was barely a whisper. 'Are you completely a skeleton?'
Vladislav increased his high-pitched whine, before controlling himself and falling silent.
'I um…well…' he composed his thoughts, 'I have a solid body' Vladislav explained. 'But my hands, feet and head, are skeletal.'
'Oh' Beatrice sighed. 'I see…'
'I hope that does not make you uncomfortable in any way' Vladislav said.

‘Why would that make me uncomfortable?’
‘Well…’ Vladislav pondered. ‘Some people are afraid or those who are different, some people hate those who are different, or shun them.’
‘I could never hate you’ Beatrice told him then. ‘And I would never shun you.’
‘Might you ever be afraid of me?’
‘Hm.’ Beatrice thought about this for only the briefest moment before responding. ‘I would not be afraid of you for your appearance.’
‘Really?’ Vladislav turned his head to face Beatrice, sitting up slightly to allow space for his horns, so that he was able to face her without knocking them.
‘If you were to become angry with me, or threatening towards me…then I would have a reason to fear you, not for your appearance.’
‘I would never want you to feel that way.’
There was a pause.
‘How did you feel when you first saw me?’ Vladislav asked Beatrice.
‘I don’t know’ Beatrice mumbled. ‘I think…I was more confused than anything else, especially after what you said.’
‘And what did I say?’ Vladislav asked. ‘Do remind me.’
‘You said that I was beautiful.’
‘Ah, yes.’ Vladislav faced towards the sky again, eyes shining in the dark. ‘I remember.’
They continued to stare up towards the heavens.
‘*There’* Vladislav pointed then, ‘did you see that?’
‘I saw only a dark shape.’
‘That was a bat’ Vladislav told her. ‘Look, there’s another one. They’re so fast, they can be difficult to see.’
‘Are they the same creatures like the one I saw before?’ Beatrice asked.
‘Yes, the one you saw in the kitchen, only a different species. The one you saw in the kitchen was a fruit bat, the littles ones that fly above us now, are brown bats.’
‘They are much smaller’ Beatrice noted.
‘They are…’ Vladislav said, his eyes burning bright, ‘dear little things…’

*One year later…*

Beatrice was fast asleep under the stairs, her hand hanging over the edge of the bed.
It was still early, the sun still connected to the horizon.
Something pushed the front door open from outside, reaching its head in and sniffing the air.
The deer stepped carefully into the hall, moving tentatively, drawing closer to Beatrice.
Its nose touched her hand, but Beatrice was not alarmed in the slightest.
This had been the way she had been woken for the last several months, and not only had she grown accustomed to it, but she had begun to find comfort in it also. The deer seemingly did

as well. On the few occasions Beatrice had not been in bed in the morning, perhaps having fallen asleep reading in another room, the deer had come looking for her.
Beatrice felt the deer's soft nose touch her hand, and she smiled automatically, turning her palm over.
'Good morning sweetie.'
Beatrice sat up, pushing back the sheets.
The first thing she did was to grab a cup from the pantry, scooping some animal feed.
She headed outside, towards the front door, the deer following her.
Outside there were others waiting eagerly for their breakfast.
Beatrice tossed the cup of feed in the air, and the small group of deer began to feed.
Beatrice returned to her bed, tidying it, and undressing quickly. She changed into her day-clothes, putting away her nightgown neatly in one of the boxes stored under her bed.
She then went back to the kitchen, tying her hair up.
Beatrice began to cook breakfast.
By the time Vladislav can downstairs, his breakfast was already on the table waiting for him.
Beatrice sat opposite him, eating a bowl of peaches, as was habit for her most mornings. She loved fruit very much, peaches being one of her favourites. She had made Vladislav a full breakfast, which he finished off with a slab of raw steak.
'That was absolutely delightful' Vladislav declared.
'You say that all the time' Beatrice waved him away.
'That's because it's always true' he replied with glowing eyes.
Once the table had been cleared away, and the dishes cleaned, dried, and put back in their place, the two went outside together.
Once the morning chores were completed, feeding the animals and some general cleaning and tidying, the two were able to relax.
Now it was ten o'clock, and the day was beautiful.
Vladislav had left Beatrice, he had gone inside for a short time, returning with a tray of steaming tea and some shortbread biscuits.
'This is the life' Beatrice sighed, smiling as he approached.
Vladislav stopped, placing the tray on the small table nearby.
Beatrice was kneeing in the dirt now; she had been planting some fresh flowers Vladislav had moved from the greenhouse. They had grown, and were no longer 'baby flowers,' as Beatrice so lovingly called them.
'What do you mean?' Vladislav glowed. 'You have been working all morning.'
'And it feels wonderful' Beatrice beamed towards the sky. 'Working gives me purpose. I feel so achieved doing these things. Caring for the animals…caring for the garden…' she gazed about her. 'The animals are all happy, and the garden is so pretty. I'm sure that even the flowers are happy.'
'Unfortunately, not all the flowers are doing well' Vladislav told her, reaching into his coat pocket, and pulling out a shrivelled plant. 'These new ones have been dying again. I don't think the rest of the plant is going to make it. Maybe it's a good idea to take the flowers while they still look presentable to press them. They would look lovely in a frame.'
'Another one of the flowers you've brought from afar' Beatrice mumbled, looking at it sadly. 'I wonder why they're not thriving here. Never mind' she said suddenly beaming, 'pressing them would be nice. It's something to look forward to tonight.'

‘It’s my turn to cook anyway’ Vladislav informed her. ‘I’ll get dinner ready while you press the flowers.’
‘And can I read to you after dinner?’ Beatrice asked excitedly.
‘Absolutely.’

They sat together and enjoyed the tea and biscuits, talking about trivial things, between bouts of comfortable silence in which they enjoyed the world around them.
Once they were done, Vladislav cleared away the tray and dishes and went inside to wash and tidy up.
When he returned outside again, he found Beatrice was now resting by the koi pond. She was sitting at the edge, fingers trailing in the pond as she teased the koi playfully, smiling as they nibbled her skin softly with their gentle mouths.
‘It tickles’ she told him as he approached.
The dog Jack appeared from a hidden location, drawn by her voice. He padded up to her, wagging his bushy tail once, before licking her with this strange purple tongue, then moving away again.
‘Always on patrol’ Vladislav noted.
‘He never stops working’ Beatrice said, ‘he is so dedicated to his job.’
‘And he does it well’ Vladislav nodded. He looked away then, attention moving off into the distance. ‘The beach is looking pretty’ he observed.
Beatrice sat back on her heels.
‘I wish I were as tall as you’ Beatrice sighed. ‘Then I would be able to see the sea, or at least catch a glimpse of it.’
Vladislav reached out to her, without warning, grasping her firmly with his skeletal hands, lifting her up.
Betrice gave a small yelp of surprise at being so swiftly lifted into the air.
Vladislav placed her upon his shoulder, turning his body to face the sea.
‘Can you see it now?’ Vladislav asked.
Beatrice blinked, looking up and straightening her back.
‘Ah!’ she exclaimed. ‘Yes. I see it.’
She fell silent for a moment as she continued to gaze.
‘It’s so pretty’ she uttered.
‘You know’ Vladislav said, tilting his head up to her, ‘the beach isn’t too far away. We could go there together. Would you like that?’
Beatrice thought about this.
‘I would’ she said. ‘I’ve never been to the beach before. It would make me happy to go there for the first time with you.’
‘We could do that’ Vladislav told her. ‘Today, right now.’
‘Do you mean it?’
Vladislav reached up to hold Beatrice again, lifting her off his shoulder and placing her gently back on the ground.
‘I’ve never visited the beach before’ Beatrice said again, speaking quietly as if to herself, ‘I’m excited.’
‘We should have done it sooner’ Vladislav said. ‘It’s a lovely ride there, maybe a little too far to comfortably walk however.’

‘That’s why you bought that second horse’ Beatrice smiled. ‘I was wondering.’
Vladislav began to hiss.
‘You’re amused.’
‘And you are learning to read me all too well’ Vladislav replied.
‘I won’t deny’ Beatrice said, ‘I was a little sad when you left. I imagined you off having all sorts of fun adventures without me.’
‘Now don’t make me feel bad’ Vladislav told her. ‘It had to be a surprise. If you came along and saw what I was buying, it wouldn’t have been much of a surprise.’
‘You were gone for days’ Beatrice protested. ‘I was getting lonely.’
‘You could not possibly have been lonely’ Vladislav argued back. ‘Not with all the animals to keep you company. All the koi we have, all the plants. You know, it’s said by some that plants enjoy classical music. Maybe if you talk to the plants, or sing a lullaby to them, they might grow taller and stronger. Maybe that is what the foreign plants I’ve been bringing here are missing. Maybe they need to be sung to, like the birds in their homeland.’
Beatrice giggled in amusement.
‘Anyway,’ Vladislav said clearing his throat, ‘I thought it best for Jingle to settle in before taking her out on an extended ride. And now seems like a good time.’
Beatrice clapped her hands together excitedly. ‘Shall I prepare a picnic basket?’
‘I’ve already done it’ Vladislav told her. ‘I’ll go get it. You prepare the horses. You can manage Boadicea, can’t you?’
Boadicea was Vladislav’s personal horse he used for riding; she was a Shire. A mountain of a creature, but incredibly gentle and sweet-nature. Beatrice’s own was a little pony, perfect for her size. She was palomino in colour, and named after a horse she had read about in a children’s story book. One of the earlier books she had read when learning to read, with the guidance from Vladislav. Beatrice had mentioned that she loved the colour of the horse in the picture-book, and had named her own pony after the character in the story.
‘Of course I can handle Boadicea. She’s a big sweet-heart.’
‘Excellent’ Vladislav said, putting his hands together. ‘You get the horses ready; I will get the picnic basket and blankets and drinks.’

A short time later, the two of them left the property.
‘The place is in your capable hands now Jack’ Vladislav said enthusiastically, waving jovially at the dog, who stared listlessly back from his position beside the koi pond.
Vladislav and Beatrice left the property via the back gate, beginning the pleasant journey to the beach, at one point they began to canter, playfully racing each other.
When they reached the edge of the sparsely growing trees, Beatrice let out a gasp, seeing the environment open up. Clean sands reached far in either direction, and before them, the waves rolled up the beach in their never-ending cycles.
There was no one else around, besides from Vladislav and Beatrice and their horses, the only creatures that could be seen at this time, were a few birds in the distance, sitting upon the rocks.
Vladislav dismounted the shire, patting her dark coat lovingly.
‘We’re here’ he said, tossing the reigns over a branch and reaching for the bag he had prepared.
Nearby, Beatrice did the same, finding a lower branch, and placing the reigns of her pony over it.

Beatrice padded forwards, stepping out of the trees, moving slowly towards the sea.
She knelt slowly, touching the sand beneath her, before pushing her hands into the sand, feeling the grit between her fingers.
'It feels…interesting.'
'Doesn't it just' Vladislav replied. 'Now come on, let's find a nice place to sit.'

## Chapter Twelve
## Sand

'…every grain is a story millions of years old. It has seen so many lives, it is important to our ecosystem, protecting coasts from wind and waves, and providing a safe-haven for all manner of creatures.'
'Wow' Beatrice sighed in awe, her eyes growing large. 'You know so much about everything.'
'I've not even scratching the surface' Vladislav told her. 'Not even touching it in fact. There is so much I can tell you about the creation of the lands, and the shifting continents and oceans, creatures that have come and gone…' he paused a moment thoughtfully, seemingly trying to collect himself.
'Maybe continue with sand?' Beatrice suggested. 'It's where you left off after all.'
Vladislav lifted his mighty head, looking out towards the ocean, and her vast horizon.
'Sand comes in all sorts of colours, the rarest being green, which is caused by a special type of volcanic eruption in which crystals are brought to the earth's surface.'
'I'll have to read up more about this when we get home' Beatrice said.
'I have plenty of books about it. There are all sorts of different sources at your fingertips. I am glad you enjoy reading now.'
'It's definitely much easier' Beatrice replied.
'I told you it wouldn't be too hard' Vladislav nodded. 'Once you learn the basics, the rest comes naturally.'
'Now that you've just reminded me, there was something I wanted to tell you' Beatrice grinned at him, leaning closer.
'Oh?' Vladislav tilted his head curiously, 'and what is that?'
'Grimalkin.'
Vladislav chuckled.
'An ancient word meaning 'cat,' or, it can almost mean 'spiteful old woman.'
Beatrice glowered at that.
'Excrescence' she said.
'An outgrowth, typically abnormal or diseased, can be on both a body or a plant.'
She huffed.
'Brummagem.'
Vladislav faltered. 'Ah' he said, 'um…'
Beatrice leaned closer towards him, hanging onto his words in anticipation.
Vladislav hissed then, dipping his head.
'I am afraid I must admit defeat' he told her. 'I do not know what that word means.'
Beatrice let out a triumphant cry, clapping her hands excitedly.

‘Finally,’ she declared, ‘after all this time, the master has been defeated!’
‘Well tell me then’ Vladislav replied, ‘don’t keep me in suspense. Tell me what it means already.’
‘It means to be ‘cheap’ and ‘showy’.’ She told him. ‘It’s spelled like this…’ she wrote the word in the sand, ‘and its pronounced brum-ma-gem.’
‘Very good’ Vladislav nodded, leaning forwards to observe the word. ‘Have you finished your snacks now?’ he asked.
‘I have.’
‘Then let’s go and see the rockpools. I want to show you the creatures you can find.’

They had a wonderful time looking in the pools, seeing what life resided in there. Beatrice was able to see several different types of fish, crabs, a starfish, some anemone, sea urchins, and what Vladislav described as a ‘mermaid’s purse,’ which he explained was an egg case for a shark.
‘There’s a shark in there?’ Beatrice asked.
‘Perhaps’ Vladislav replied, putting the thing back in the water. ‘It could also be some kind of ray.’
‘What is that?’
‘A ray?’
‘Yes.’
Vladislav pondered this.
‘It’s like a fish that looks like a blanket.’
‘What?’ Beatrice replied, speaking after a few moments, once her brain had gradually processed what Vladislav said. ‘How can a fish be a blanket?’
‘Fish can look like all sorts of things’ Vladislav told her. ‘As can animals.’ He paused. ‘I can show you a picture when we get home.’
‘And what is a shark?’
‘A predatory fish’ Vladislav replied, ‘with a lot of scary teeth.’
‘Sounds scary’ Beatrice uttered.
‘It can be, especially if you’re in the water. But don’t worry’ he said, placing a gentle hand upon her shoulder. ‘They don’t like the taste of people. Most of them would not be interested in eating you. And the ones that are, well…we don’t have them in this area.’
‘Well,’ Beatrice sighed deeply, feeling a little more relieved. ‘That’s good.’
‘Oh look’ Vladislav said suddenly, reaching into the rockpool, his glove already soaking wet.
‘What is it?’
‘It’s a little baby octopus’ Vladislav said, his voice endearing. ‘Look at how sweet and small it is.’
Beatrice came closer to look at the strange thing.
‘It looks so…. bizarre’ she said. ‘I’ve never seen an animal like that.’
‘There are all sorts that have not been discovered yet, and some of what we have discovered, have been truly other worldly.’
Beatrice stared at the strange thing, sliding across his hand with its weird tentacles.
‘How big do they get?’ Beatrice asked.
‘Not that big. Maybe about the size of my head. At least the ones we know about. Although there are some legends and stories that say they can grow to the size of a building.’
‘Woah, that’s pretty big.’ Beatrice paused. ‘Do you think that might be true?’

‘Maybe.’
‘Has anything indicating the possibility ever been found?’
‘Not that I’m aware of. Not for certain anyway, outside of various stories that cannot be verified. Though I suspect it’s very possible, and that the only reason we don’t know for sure, is that they are perhaps living in parts of the world not yet explored. Perhaps around the frozen continents, or so deep down that we cannot reach.’
Vladislav dipped his head, seeing the little thing on his hand.
‘You know they can change colour’ he said.
‘Change colour?’
‘Yes. Octopus and squid, a similar creature, can change the colour of their skin. They are said to be quite intelligent. They are truly fascinating’ Vladislav said.
‘Are they dangerous?’ Beatrice asked.
‘Not particularly. There are some that are poisonous, and it has been known for larger octopus to grab a person and pull them underwater, but might well just be a fable.’ Vladislav continued to hold the octopus gently. ‘I would say they are mostly harmless. Don’t you try this yourself mind. They have a sharp beak in the centre of all those tentacles, and while this one isn’t all that dangerous, it could still give you a nasty bite. Not for me though. I don’t feel it. A poisonous one would not be much of a threat to me either, since I have no flesh.’
‘Do you feel anything?’ Beatrice asked suddenly.
‘Hm?’
‘Can you…feel anything in your bones…or your body? Like…warmth from the sun…or any sort of pain?’
‘Yes’ Vladislav answered. ‘I feel those things. All those things, just in a different way.’ He said, reaching down. ‘Don’t think too hard on it.’ Vladislav returned his hand to the rockpool, placing his skeletal fingers beneath the surface.
The octopus immediately released him, swimming quickly away and becoming invisible.
Beatrice let out a sigh, dipping her head.
Vladislav rose to his feet putting his arm around her, shielding her from the now chilly breeze.
‘It’s getting late’ he told her. ‘You must be getting tired. We should head back now.’

## Chapter Thirteen
## Bees

It was dark by the time they returned home. Vladislav put the horses away, feeding them, giving them fresh water.
By the time he found Beatrice once again, she was resting.
‘How are you?’ he asked her.
‘I am happy’ Beatrice sighed, ‘I loved the day. I don’t think I’ve ever been to the beach before. I’ve seen the beach from a distance…but I’ve never been there…at least I don’t think so…maybe when I was younger…I don’t remember.’
‘You sound tired’ Vladislav spoke slowly.
‘Tired’ Beatrice said, ‘but happy.’

‘I am glad’ Vladislav replied.
He moved away from her.
‘You stay here and rest’ he told her. ‘I’ll prepare some food.’
‘Before you go’ Beatrice stopped him, ‘could you give me a book about sharks?’
‘Absolutely.’
Vladislav drifted through the home, coming to a certain shelf, and taking a book.
‘I am curious myself’ he mused, flicking through the book, ‘ah, here we go’ he said, opening the book and turning it towards Beatrice, ‘mermaid’s purse, shark eggs’ he told her. ‘And here…’ he flicked through the book to another page, ‘sting rays, the ‘blanket fish’ I was telling you about. There is also a larger type called a manta ray that lives in the open ocean. But you are unlikely to see those. Here’ he said, showing her the page.
Beatrice took the book, looking at the pictures of the sting rays.
‘That’s…a living thing?’ Beatrice uttered. ‘It’s so flat.’
‘Yes,’ Vladislav said. He stepped back. ‘Have a look through that book. I’ll make some soup.’
‘Perfect.’

They ate in the living room instead of the table on that day, doing so as a sort of one-off treat. Afterwards, Beatrice helped tidy the kitchen, closing the window for the night, before turning and smiling to the fruit bat hanging in his place. She gave him some banana, and a few scratches, before moving on, closing the door, and leaving the bat to his peace. To rest for the night.
Beatrice returned to the sitting room, where they had dessert, and began to press some of the flowers Vladislav had collected before.
‘They’ll look beautiful when they’re framed.’
‘They will.’
‘We could sell them tomorrow’ Vladislav told her. ‘When we visit the market to buy some bees.’
‘We’re buying bees?’
‘Yes,’ Vladislav said, putting his hand on her shoulder gently and squeezing. ‘They might be what we need to help the foreign flowers thrive. Thank you for suggesting it.’
Beatrice blushed slightly, dipping her head, and brushing her hair behind an ear.
‘It’s been a while since I’ve been in public.’
‘I hope you are not self-conscious.’
‘A little…’ Beatrice said, touching her patterned skin.
‘Don’t be’ Vladislav said to her. ‘You should be proud. And don’t worry, you’ll be completely protected with me beside you. Now will you read to me?’
‘Oh, um…yes, of course.’
After she had chosen a book, she began to read.
‘Chapter one… It was a clear day; the creature lay snoozing in a patch of dusty earth the chickens had rooted through, as they searched for worms and dropped seeds. He gave a deep sigh; dust before his nose was blown up, settling again. His favourite spot in the village to rest was this one here, where the trickling sound of the river was pleasant to hear, and the fish jumping and dancing out of the water was pleasant to see. He heard barking and howling in the distance, the creature opened his eyes and lifted his head. On the opposite side of the river, three white creatures played, chasing each other, chasing the butterflies, jumping and stalking one another, pulling their sibling’s ears. But they were good. They were well behaved, and

never bothering the sheep and chickens in the small village. Never bothering the people. These children went to sleep with the sun, were mostly quiet, and almost always obedient. They weren't perfect, and occasionally did get into trouble, but they were still young and learning.
The creature watched with pride as the three white figures played, running around the houses and over the bridge. His children, his daughters. They were good girls, unlike their brother, who was always getting into trouble...'

## Chapter Fourteen
## Visiting the Market

The next morning, as was routine, the deer approached the front door, intending to push it open and wander over to the bed beneath the stairs, to wake Beatrice and demand food.
But on this day, Beatrice was already awake.
'Good morning' she smiled down at the deer from the window above. 'Looks like I'm awake before you this time.' She grinned, leaning forwards, further out the window. 'Are you ready for breakfast?'
She threw the oats out of the window, and they rained down upon the heads of the several deer below her. They lowered their heads, and began to feed happily.
Beatrice crossed her arms, leaning forwards upon the windowsill.
'They are lovely creatures' Vladislav said, coming up behind her, 'aren't they.'
'They are' Beatrice sighed. She tilted her head back at Vladislav. 'You're up early.'
'I was going to say the same to you' Vladislav said. 'I suppose you're excited about visiting the market today?'
'I am.'
'Then we shall leave soon' Vladislav said to her, turning away. 'How about I cook breakfast while you feed the animals?'
'It still feels strange' she said then.
'What does?' he asked pausing.
'Being asked things instead of being told' she concluded. 'I still haven't gotten used to it, even after all this time. It's difficult getting used to something so different after a lifetime of…um…'
'It's ok' Vladislav said fondly. 'I'll meet you in the kitchen.'
'This will be my first time travelling by magic' Beatrice voiced, 'won't it?' She straightened up, turning away from the window, looking back to him. 'Or are we travelling by carriage?'
'I think' Vladislav mused, speaking slowly, 'now would be a great time to travel by magic. The carriage will take several hours one way and…. well…the sooner we get there, to the market I mean, the more time we have to look around.'
'Perfect.'
'And just remember, travelling by magic for the first time might make you a bit sick. You might have to sit for a moment. If you're not used to it, it can be very disorientating.'
'Ok.'

Beatrice headed downstairs, going into the pantry, she opened the large window and stepped back. Moments later, the fruit bat tilted his head towards Beatrice, his large ears twitching, then

he extended his wings. The large creature flapped past her, through the open windows, and out into the open world, to go and do whatever business he wanted to do for that day. Most likely he was going to search for his own breakfast of fruit.
Beatrice then busied herself with her morning chores, feeding the koi, giving the chow his breakfast.
'Good morning Jack' Beatrice said to him, as he pranced around her ankles.
She placed the bowl down on the ground, and he ate gratefully.
She then went about the property, tending to the other animals, before returning to the kitchen.
'What is this?' Beatrice asked, sitting at her place at the table, seeing nothing before her but a glass of something.
'It's fruit juice' Vladislav explained. 'I know this looks sort of bad' he waved at her defensively, glancing towards his own spot at the table, where there was a full breakfast. 'I've been thinking about the magic. It will likely make you sick, so it's probably best not to eat anything. But I'll buy anything you want to eat once we get there. How does that sound?'
Beatrice only giggled.
'That's ok' she said. 'Thank you for caring for me.'

Once the kitchen was tidy, the two of them went outside together.
Now they stood in an open area, a grassy patch near the home, only a short distance away from the front door.
'How are you feeling?' Vladislav asked Beatrice.
'A little nervous' she admitted. 'Only a little though.'
Vladislav nodded.
'That is to be expected.'
A light appeared before them, growing in size until it was as tall as Vladislav. It was oval and appeared to be flat, looking like the surface of a mirror, shining silver like a clear sheet.
Vladislav hunched his body slightly, putting his arm around Beatrice, holding her shoulder firmly.
He took a step forwards, pulling Beatrice with him, and together they stepped through the portal.
Beatrice closed her eyes tight shut, feeling her stomach twist and tighten, feeling her feet leave the ground.
She opened her eyes, finding herself in a new place.
'We're here' Vladislav declared.
She immediately began to tilt backwards. Vladislav pulled her firmly to him, before she could fall.
Beatrice then tilted forwards, throwing up.
Vladislav made a strange sound then, something between a hiss and a whine.
He patted her on the back gently.
'I'm sorry' Vladislav told her. 'I know it's unpleasant at first.'
'You were right' Beatrice grumbled, straightening up, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand. 'I'm sorry' she said.

‘It’s ok. You should be fine to eat something now.’ He turned his head away, facing the buildings before them. ‘We’ll get you something nice. What about something sweet, would you like some pastries?’
‘Anything you think is nice’ Beatice replied. ‘I don’t mind.’
They stepped off the grass, moving towards the road.
Beatrice looked about her as they went, studying the new environment in which they found themselves.
This place was somewhat familiar to her, having visited this area a few times in her younger days, not to mention being sold, bought, sold, and bought again. There few good memories she had of this place, mostly they were bad ones.
‘It’s been a long time’ Beatrice muttered to herself.
‘What was that?’
‘Um…n-nothing’ Beatrice muttered.

A short time later, Beatrice was sitting alone at a small table. From where she sat, she could see Vladislav ordering at the counter.
Beatrice pursed her lips, glancing about her at the other figures going about their business. There were several tables around her, people milling around, sitting at various seats, the gentle murmur of chatter humming all about.
Beatrice patted her lap, looking back towards Vladislav.
She didn’t like being away from him, not in this place that was not her home, this place that was so crowded. She felt great relief seeing Vladislav coming towards her, leaning forward in her chair anxiously.
He placed a paper bag before her on the table, and a cup of something.
‘It’s coffee’ he told her. ‘I know we don’t have it very often at home. I thought it might help wake you up. A special treat.’
‘And what’s in the bags?’
‘Apple pastries’ Vladislav told her cheerily.
He lowered himself into the seat opposite Beatrice, opening his own paper bag he carried and peering eagerly inside.
Beatrice opened the bag she had been given.
‘They’re called turnovers’ Vladislav said, watching Beatrice as she took the pastry out.
‘They’re triangle’ Beatrice muttered.
‘They are.’
Vladislav took his own pastry out of his bag, opening his large jaws and throwing the entire thing into his throat.
Beatrice stared at him as he did this, noticing others around were doing the same, wearing curious expressions (while others appeared afraid) as they focused on the oddity that was Vladislav, with his skeletal head. It was not very often that a person saw a mage. They were rare creatures after all.
Though it was not only Vladislav that the people gave frequent glances to, but Beatrice as well.
Beatrice dipped her head.

‘Look up’ Vladislav told her. ‘Hold your head proudly. And smile.’
She looked up at him, smiling.
Vladislav’s eyes began to glow brightly, and he began to make a sound, one that Beatrice had not heard directed towards her before. It was a strange chittering sort of sound, and his jaw trembled as he did this.
‘Your skin is beautiful’ he told her. ‘Never forget that.’
‘I will try my best.’
‘That is all you can do.’
Vladislav lifted his own cup of coffee, bringing it to his skeletal mouth, tipping his head back and drinking a little. The liquid ran down his tongue and into his throat.
Beatrice found herself thinking, not for the first time, how awkward it must be for him to drink. And yet he made it look so easy.
Her eyes shifted about her again, though she kept her head still.
She looked back at Vladislav, speaking in a quieter voice now.
‘Do you ever feel self-conscious about people staring at you?’
‘Not at all’ he replied. ‘I have an animal skull as a head’ he went on. ‘Of course people stare. I stopped noticing it years ago.’
‘Oh…right…well…’ Beatrice glanced down, realising herself then, before lifting her head again, showing her patchwork skin proudly. ‘I only really noticed people staring at me once I was taken out of my village’ Beatrice said to him. ‘Once I was brought…’ she broke off, ‘…here…’
Vladislav took another drink from his cup.
‘Did you get coffee too?’ Beatrice asked.
‘Yes, I did. You know I usually have tea, but this is a nice treat.’
Beatrice nodded.
‘Take your time in eating’ Vladislav told her. ‘Your stomach might still be a little unsettled.’
Beatrice nodded again.
‘After this, will we be going to get the bees?’
‘Of course,’ Vladislav replied, ‘but there’s no reason we can’t take our time and look around while we’re here.’
‘Of course,’ Beatrice grinned.

After finishing their food and drink, the unusual pair made their way through the market.
It was strange for Beatrice to be here, walking free. The last time she was at this place, she was in chains.
After only a short time, Beatrice saw them.
A line of people in chains, tied to both each other, and the wall of the building behind them.
They were young, looking to be between the ages of sixteen and twenty.
Seeing them standing there, the hopelessness in their eyes… it broke Beatrice’s heart.
She turned to Vladislav, begging him to buy them.
To her shock, he refused.
‘But why?’ Beatrice pressed; her heart twisted in her chest. ‘They need you, like I needed you.’
‘Listen to me Beatrice’ Vladislav said, his tone that of sincerity, urging her to understand. ‘I cannot do that. I made an exception for you because I took a specific interest in you, I also don’t like what I did in accepting you, do you know why? Because I paid for you. And because I paid for you, I did my part in supporting this terrible industry, and a part of me hates myself

for doing that. I am against this whole unpleasant affair. But I bought you anyway, because I was selfish. I *am* selfish. Selfish and a hypocrite. And that makes me hate myself.'
'Please don't feel that way' Beatrice whispered, after a few moments of stunned silence. 'You are not selfish, and I don't see you as a hypocrite.' She raised her head to him, maintaining eye contact. 'You saved me. I owe you my life.'
Vladislav began to make that noise again. That chittering noise, and his jaw began to tremble.
'Again?' She said. 'That's the second time you've made that noise towards me' Beatrice noted. 'I've heard you make that noise to your creatures…the deer… the fish.' She paused. 'What does it mean?'
'It's love' Vladislav said.
Beatrice's eyes widened, and she froze for a moment, seemingly caught off-guard.
'You…love me?'
'Yes' Vladislav answered. 'You've been a delightful companion for me, and I've really enjoyed your company, our discussions, your cooking.' His eyes burned brightly. An expression of pride and joy. 'Your reading' he continued. 'I've really enjoyed teaching you. You've been a keen student and a pleasure to share stories with. You've even begun to educate me. It's been wonderful to watch you grow and thrive.'
'Chersonese.'
'I'm sorry?'
'Chersonese' Beatrice repeated with a devious grin. 'What does it mean?'
Vladislav maintained his frozen posture for a moment, before beginning to hiss in amusement, his shoulders trembling with mirth.
'I have to admit' he began, 'that I do not know.'
'You don't know what it means?' Beatrice grinned, overcome with triumph now.
'I do not know what it means.'
Beatrice hopped on the spot, clapping her hands together joyfully.
'It means peninsula' Beatrice explained. 'It is derived from a Greek term.'
Beatrice stopped her bouncing, holding her hands behind her back now.
'A peninsula is a piece of land that is almost entirely surrounded by water but still connected to the mainland' Beatrice blurted quickly.
'I know what a peninsula is' Vladislav responded in a scolding manner, hands upon his hips, skull-like head looming over her.
But Beatrice was not intimidated by this. Instead of shying away, as some might have done, she threw herself at Vladislav suddenly without warning, wrapping her arms around his large frame, burying her face in his clothes.
Vladislav froze, arms held outwards in surprise for a few moments, before he relaxed.
Vladislav reached his arms around her, embracing her softly, enveloping her in his clothes, his large coat and sleeves.
'I love you too' Beatrice said. 'You've been a wonderful teacher, and a wonderful guardian.'
She let out a sigh, still continuing to hold him.
'I'm glad you bought me.'

## Chapter Fifteen
## Little Feather

They wandered throughout the entire market, exploring every part of it that was available to potential customers.
Vladislav offered to buy Beatrice whatever she wanted, though she declined.
'I have everything I need already' she told him.
'That doesn't mean you can't at least try this on' Vladislav objected, lifting the large green hat he had picked up. 'Come on, I want to see what it looks like on you.'
Beatrice let out a sigh of amusement, stepping forward and bowing her head.
Vladislav placed it upon her, taking a step back to admire her.
'It looks wonderful.'
Beatrice looked up to the brim of the hat that hung over her eyes, the hat was emerald green in colour, with jewels woven into the fabric, and a large feather on one side.
'What is this feather?' Beatrice asked as she gazed at her reflection, lifting her hands and feeling the material above her. 'Woah, it must be a really big bird.'
'It's an ostrich feather.'
'What is that?' Beatrice turned away from the large oval mirror upon the table, facing Vladislav once again.
'It's a really big bird' Vladislav told her, and Beatrice chuckled. 'I'll show you a picture when we get home.' He paused, considering her for a moment. 'Are you sure you don't want the hat?'
'No no' Beatrice smiled, taking it off and handing it back to him. 'It's not really my style.'
'But it's such a unique hat' Vladislav protested. 'It has lots of character.'
'But it covers my face' Beatrice argued, 'I have enough character in my face already.'
Vladislav faltered, before beginning to hiss.
Beatrice smiled at that, recognising this reaction as that of amusement.
'Very good' Vladislav said to her, 'very very good.' He placed the hat back on the table, turning back to Beatrice and patting her gently on the head. 'Good girl, so smart.'
'Only because of you' she said warmly.

They continued to explore the market, eventually coming to their destination, the reason they had left their home in the first place. The bee keepers. There were two of them, a man, and a woman.
Vladislav went to talk to them, discussing everything he needed to know about this new hobby, how to start up, what was needed, and what to expect in the future. It was a very involved hobby after all.
While they conducted their business, Beatrice wandered a short distance away, approaching something that caught her interest. It was a box, sitting under the shade of a small tree. Looking inside, she saw a mother with her seven little kittens. The mother cat was very large in size. The kittens were all very fluffy, and different shades of silver, some with white chests.

Beatrice couldn't stop herself from cooing, leaning over the box and smiling.
A teenage girl approached her then, the daughter of the man and woman who were speaking with Vladislav. The girl offered Beatrice a kitten to hold.
Beatrice took the little kitten gratefully, smiling.
'Oh my goodness' she said in a hushed voice. 'So precious…so tiny…I didn't realise how little they weighed. I feel like I'm holding a feather.'

Vladislav bought the equipment needed for bee keeping, all brand new to help prevent disease. He bought one box of bees, sold by the pound, with one queen. He also bought two hives, based on the advice of the keepers, hoping to have at least a little honey produced in the first year. The sellers were both very enthusiastic, and it was clear that they were deeply passionate for their hobby, both starting many years ago when their baby was less than a year old. It had now become a lifelong hobby for them, and for their daughter, who loved the bees also.
Vladislav gathered everything they had purchased, walking out of the bustling streets, and to the edge of the city, where there was more open space.
They travelled back by magic, an unpleasant experience for Beatrice, though it was not as bad as it had been the first time.
She swallowed, gritting her teeth, before lowering her hand, letting out a slow sigh and straightening up.
'I wasn't sick this time…'
Beatrice looked up towards Vladislav, smiling.
'There's my girl' Vladislav said, placing a hand upon her shoulder.
Beatrice placed her own hand upon Vladislav's.

## Chapter Sixteen
## First Night

Beatrice sat on the floor of the living room, rolling the ball across the floor, the bell inside jingling lightly. The kitten ran after it excitedly.
It was a female Maine Coon. She was 13 weeks old, silver in colour, and very fluffy with a white chest. As was typical for her breed, there was a little M-shape on her forehead, just above her eyes. Vladislav explained that many of them, though not all, had this marking
Beatrice had decided to name her Freya. A name she had learned in one of the many books she had read during her time with Vladislav.
It took Freya a few minutes to gain the confidence to leave her little basket carrier, initially she stayed, just observing her new surroundings and meowing constantly. Though in time, she stepped out, and began to explore the environment. Beatrice tried to get her attention with the new toys.
'Here's how you do it' Vladislav offered her. 'Pretend it's a prey, move it along the floor…like this…' he demonstrated.

The kitten's eyes grew large, and she pounced.
For a few more minutes Vladislav played with the kitten.
Freya seemed to like him a lot, was drawn to him, perhaps sensing his comfort and familiarity around cats.
Vladislav then brought out a paper bag, placing it before the kitten, and scratching the base of the bag. The kitten immediately leapt into the bag. Beatrice gasped in fright and surprise, seeing the kitten's sharp claws piercing the paper.
'Is she angry?' Beatrice asked.
'Not at all' Vladislav said, 'it's how they play. You try it, but maybe use the toy instead.'
Vladislav lifted one of the toys that had bought.
'Just tickled the bag like this' Vladislav demonstrated, tickling the floor near the bag with the toy.
Beatrice took the little stick Vladislav offered her; it had a little pink feather on the tip.
Freya became very excited at this, frantically playing. She did this for a time before turning away, continuing to explore the room she was in, and crying the whole time.
'What's wrong with her?' Beatrice asked Vladislav.
'Nothing' Vladislav replied. 'She's frightened.'
'Frightened?' Beatrice copied.
'It's nothing to worry about. It's normal for a kitten to be stressed when moving to a new home. How would you feel if you were put in a box and taken to a strange new place?'
Beatrice pursed her lips, brow furrowed now.
'Don't worry' Vladislav comforted. 'She will settle in. It'll just take some time.'
'I feel bad now for taking her away from her mother' Beatrice muttered.
'Don't be. It's what's best for both mother and kitten. After a time, the mother will no longer tolerate her own kittens, and will even begin to bully them if they don't leave on their own. It's simply their nature.'
'Really?'
'Yes. A long time ago I had a mother cat that had several litters. I kept some of the kittens once they grew up, others I found new homes for. The mother would always bully her own children once they matured, as she would have done if living in the wild. But even in a domestic environment, that behaviour is retained.'
'You've had kittens before?' Beatrice asked.
'I've had many, for many years.' Vladislav told her. 'They've come and gone over time, cats, kittens, both wild and domestic. I even had a cat with two faces at one point.'
'Two faces?'
'Yes, it was very peculiar. She had three eyes, the one in the middle shared between the two faces. Two noses, two mouths, but only two ears. She was born like that, lived for a few years and was very friendly. But eventually died young due to various and complicated health issues.'
'Oh' Beatrice said, eyes growing wide as she wondered what such a cat might look like.
'I've not had a cat for a long while' Vladislav went on. 'My last one was a tortoise-shell female I had named Greta. She was a sweet girl; she would love to sit on and around my head while I slept. Even though I don't have what you might call a *face'* Vladislav paused to hiss in amusement at this, 'I think she still knew where my *face* would be, and I think that she just wanted to be as close to me as possible.' Vladislav turned his head away. 'I buried her near my home, *our* home' he corrected himself. 'She lived to about 25 years old. I didn't have her since she was a kitten so I had to guess her age in the beginning, but she was young when she first

came to me, which she did as a stray, simply turning up to my doorstep one day and deciding that this was her home. Which I was ok with' he hissed. 'She is buried beneath the river where she liked to watch the fish, she rests beneath the very water, I used magic to place her there. It was a very difficult day. I miss her very much, even now.'
'What is a tortoise-shell?' Beatrice asked.
'It's a sort of colouring' Vladislav explained. 'A pattern of white, black and light-brown, each as unique as a finger print.'
'What is a finger print?'
'A pattern that appears on your finger. Unique to the human as the tortoise-shell pattern is to a cat.' Vladislav took her hand in his own skeletal one. 'On your fingertips, and on the rest of your hand, you will find a pattern there. See?'
Beatrice frowned at her finger closely, seeing he was right.
'I never noticed before' she mumbled, studying the rest of her hand then, before examining the other. 'How strange. I guess there are still great gaps in my knowledge.'
'Put it from your mind for now' Vladislav told her. 'Freya is tired. She will rest for a few hours probably. Cat's sleep a lot, kittens more so.' He straightened up. 'Why don't you read me a story?' he suggested. 'I would love that very much.'
Beatrice smiled at this, eyes lighting up, much like his did.
'I would love that too' she said.

They both left the room to head to the kitchen for a quick meal, but finding herself alone, Freya quickly became distressed, crying loudly once more. And so, Beatrice brought her to the kitchen with them.
'She just wants company' Vladislav told Beatrice, as she huddled the kitten to her chest. 'She doesn't want to be by herself.'
'That's understandable.'
Vladislav prepared a snack and they sat at the table. Freya eventually fell asleep on Beatrice's lap as she ate.
After this, they returned to the living room, and Freya continued to sleep.
'Poor little dear' Beatrice sighed. 'She's had such a tiring day.'
'She has. Here' Vladislav said, handing Beatrice an open book.
Beatrice gazed down at the pages of the book before her.
'So, this is an ostrich' she said in awe, seeing the diagram of the bird, with the sketch of an average-sized human beside it. 'Such a strange proportioned creature.'
'Do you know that in some countries, people ride them like horses' Vladislav said, placing a cup of tea beside her.
'They do?' she looked up at him. 'That's…' she looked back to the picture. 'How would they balance?'
'The same way they usually balance' Vladislav replied.
'But why would someone ride an ostrich?' Beatrice asked in awe.
'Because people can' Vladislav told her. 'If someone can try something, then they will. How do you think blue cheese became popular?'
Beatrice closed the book on her lap slowly, frowning, as she considered his words.
Vladislav chuckled to himself.

‘What’s so funny’ Beatrice asked.
‘It’s just how things turn out.’
‘What do you mean?’
‘Well…when I went to the market, about a year ago to get a rare type of flower seed, I came home with a girl.’ He turned to face Beatrice; his eyes glowing. ‘Today I went to the market for bees, and came home with a kitten.’
‘You still got your bees.’
Vladislav sighed, walking over to Beatrice and kneeling.
He put his arm around her, draping her with his cloak. Beatrice leaned into him, feeling comfort in the shadow that loomed over her, feeling comfort in his form, nestled under his skeletal jaw.
Vladislav raised his hand, tickling the air above the kitten. Noticing this, the kitten jumped, clawing at the air, successfully pulling the black glove he wore off, revealing his bone-fingers.
Freya fell on her back, biting the glove playfully, kicking her back legs repeatedly.
‘Why do they do that?’ Beatrice asked.
‘They say it’s a primal trait kept from their wild days’ Vladislav explained, still holding her. ‘They kick their back legs to tear the stomach of their prey open when caught.’
‘Oh.’
‘Don’t worry’ Vladislav reassured her, ‘domestic cats aren’t dangerous like wilds ones can be. Even a feral cat can become tame and friendly. You’re perfectly safe.’
Beatrice let out a sigh, ‘that’s a relief.’
‘And anyway’ Vladislav went on, ‘she won’t get much bigger than her mother.’
Beatrice chuckled.
‘Well,’ Beatrice said, reaching down to Freya who had curled up at her feet, seemingly ready to fall asleep. ‘I suppose it’s time to go to bed. She looks exhausted.’
‘It has been a big day for her.’
Beatrice lifted the tiny kitten carefully. ‘This is the best gift I’ve ever received’ she sighed, tears shimmering in her eyes. ‘Thank you so much.’
‘It was a pleasure.’
She leaned into him again, feeling safe within his cloak, temporarily hidden from the world.
Eventually he released her, rising and stepping back.
‘Um…’ Beatrice said, looking down at the kitten, who rested in her open palms now, eyes closed and purring contentedly. ‘Where is she going to sleep? Should I leave her in here?’
‘She won’t want to be on her own’ Vladislav told her. ‘You can take her to bed with you, just be careful when you sleep so you don’t hurt her.’
‘Ok.’
‘I will hold her while you get dressed for bed.’
‘Thank you’ Beatrice said, handing the fluffy bundle to him. ‘I’ll be really quick.’
Vladislav stayed in the living room as Beatrice changed.
He lowered himself into the sofa, paying full attention to the kitten now, stroking her gently and scratching her under the chin.
The little kitten was indeed exhausted, but still continued purring, curled up, with her eyes closed.
Vladislav began to feel very happy.
‘It’s been a long time since I had any cats’ he spoke quietly to himself. ‘You’re so *cute,* aren’t you? *Aren’t you?* There’s a good baby…aww you’re so *precious*, yes you are…*yes you are*…’

The kitten rolled over, keeping her eyes closed, stretching her little legs, her tiny paws splayed before relaxing again.
Vladislav looked up again, noticing Beatrice standing in the doorway smiling. She was dressed in her nightgown now.
'Ah, you're here' Vladislav fumbled.
'I've never heard you speak like that' Beatrice said, her tone clearly amused.
Vladislav began to emit a high-pitched whine, a sound that alarmed and woke up the kitten, who began to cry.
'Don't be embarrassed' Beatrice said, taking the kitten back from him. 'That was really sweet.'
'Ah…um…well…' Vladislav dusted himself off then, clearing the fur from his black clothes.
'Maybe we should have gotten a black kitten' he wondered aloud. 'I was thinking' Vladislav voiced then, 'I think it would be better if you sleep in here tonight.'
'Why is that?'
'It would be better for the kitten to be contained to a small room, just for the first few nights until she begins to settle in. That way she can't get too far away from you. And if she does cause some trouble, you can grab her easily. Freya is still young and learning, it would be a good idea, just to keep an eye on her, she could fall from a high surface, fall down the stairs…it would be better if she stays close to you.'
'I've no problem with that' Beatrice cooed, lifting Freya to her face and nuzzling her.
Back in Beatrice's warm hands, the kitten began to settle down again.
'Here are some blankets and pillows' Vladislav said, taking them from a little box in the corner. 'You should be very comfortable in here. Wake me if you need help with anything. Make sure she has water available at all times, and food, her litter tray is in that corner…' he continued. 'We should leave the pads on the floor in case she has an accident. Just like human children, it takes a while for them to learn how to control themselves.'
'That makes sense' Beatrice said, 'she is just a baby after all.'

## Chapter Seventeen
## Second Night

The next morning, Vladislav woke early, descending the stairs, slowly and quietly. He opened the door to the living room.
He stared inside, seeing Beatrice fast asleep on the sofa.
Little Freya was curled up on top of Beatrice's head. The kitten staring at Vladislav with her large and beautiful eyes. Even from where he stood, Vladislav could hear the kitten purring happily away.
He closed the door quietly, going about his business. He began to work on the morning chores alone, feeding all the animals, tidying their stalls, sweeping the paths, filling the tubs with fresh water, and of course, checking on the bees.
All seemed to be well.

When Vladislav returned to the home later in the morning, he saw that Beatrice was still fast asleep on the sofa, resting in the same position. Freya was still curled up on her head, now sleeping.
Vladislav entered the room carefully, closing the door softly and approaching her.
He touched Beatrice's shoulder, speaking to her tenderly.
'Beatrice, it's time to wake up.'
Beatrice groaned, opening her eyes.
'Don't sit up. Freya is sitting on your head.'
'Hm?' Beatrice lifted her hand gingerly, feeling about until she patted Freya's warm side.
Freya instantly spoke to her, 'Mrrmph.'
'So cute' Beatrice sighed. 'What time is it?'
'It's eleven in the morning.'
'Oh no, the chores…'
'Don't worry about that' Vladislav hastened, lifting Freya carefully from her head so that Beatrice could sit up. 'They are all done.'
Beatrice sat up. 'I'm sorry' she mumbled, rubbing her eyes.
'It's ok' Vladislav said, petting Freya, 'I thought that you would likely be exhausted. It's to be expected.'
'What?'
'First night with a new kitten' Vladislav said, lifting Freya playfully into the air. '
I'm sure it took a long while for her to fully settle down.'
'It did' Beatrice said. 'It took me ages to sleep, and her too. She was very fussy, waking constantly.'
Vladislav nodded.
'It's to be expected' he said again.
'I'll get up early tomorrow' Beatrice said. 'Hopefully tonight I'll sleep a little better.'
'I'm sure you will' Vladislav said, walking away with Freya, and placing her gently on the floor before her food bowl.
Freya began to cry, over and over again, anticipating breakfast.
'Patience now little one' Vladislav told Freya. 'You'll eat very soon.'
But Freya could hardly wait. She began to climb up Vladislav's leg, crying the whole time. Soon enough she reached his elbow, nestling herself in the cook of his arm.
Vladislav placed her back on the floor gently, feeding her as quickly as he could, emptying the small tin of kitten food and tapping it upside down until all pieces were out.
Freya began to eat ravenously. Now distracted with food, she was quiet once more.
'Come on' Vladislav said turning back to Beatrice. 'We should have our own breakfast.'
'What about Freya?' Beatrice asked.
'She will have to stay here' Vladislav said. 'She needs to learn to be alone for a time. When you come back, you can let her roam the rest of the house, but keep an eye on her, until she becomes familiar with her new home. Also, she is too young to go outside just yet. She should stay indoors for a few months at least.'
'She can't go outside?' Beatrice echoed.
'She is too small' Vladislav explained. 'I'll explain more over breakfast.'

After both of them had finished their breakfast and tidied the kitchen, they returned to the living room, and a crying Freya.
'She really is like a baby' Beatrice said, cooing at her as she lifted her in her arms, cradling her tenderly.
Immediately Freya fell silent, beginning to purr.
'Let's see if she needs to use the litter tray' Vladislav said.
A short time later and after some encouraging, Vladislav began to clap enthusiastically.
'What an achievement' he said happily. 'She'll learn in no time.'
They played with Freya for an hour or so after that, allowing her to explore other parts of the home, though keeping many of the doors closed.
'So as not to overwhelm her' Vladislav explained. 'We can open a new door daily until she had free reign to all places inside. Save for the pantry' Vladislav corrected himself. 'The window needs to stay open for our leathery-winged friend.'
Freya eagerly explored the stairs and the hallways, upstairs and downstairs. It was very exciting for her, this whole new world to the little kitten was vast.
Beatrice followed the kitten about the place for several hours, rolling balls and tossing scrunched up paper about. Beatrice kept a close eye on Freya, like a concerned mother. When Freya began to climb the banisters, or at least try, Beatrice would take her and gently place her back on the floor. She felt like the kitten's own mother now.
'I've never had anything of my own to care for' Beatrice said, 'no children…is this what it feels like?'
'It feels good doesn't it' Vladislav, who had been keeping close by, amused by the kitten's antics, replied.
'I think I already love her' Beatrice said. 'You're so lucky to have had so many animals for so long. I never realised how much I was missing out.'
She clutched Freya gently to her chest, dipping her head and kissing the kittens soft and warm body. Freya let out a tiny mew, purring before drooping her head.
'Little thing must be getting tired now' Vladislav said, noticing this. 'Let's go back downstairs to the living room. You can rest on the sofa.'
'I would love that' Beatrice sighed heavily.

Beatrice slept on the sofa with the kitten once again. Vladislav left the two of them alone together, heading outside to busy himself with some tasks.
He returned hours later. Freya was still sleeping, and Beatrice was able to creep away.
She and Vladislav went to the roof again, and started star-gazing once more.

## Chapter Eighteen
## Paradise

*Months pass.*

Freya was growing nicely, and by now had free reign of not only the entire house, but of the grounds outside also.
She never travelled too far, though as was typical of cats, she would sometimes be gone for several nights at a time. But in the end, she would always return home. It seemed she missed Beatrice when she went out on her adventures, and would sleep with her in her bed almost every night.
Life continued as it had been, and things were wonderful.

Vladislav was drifting through the gardens alone now, simply looking around, admiring the flowers, checking the fences, surveying the animals, pausing to watch them, give them a pat. He did this from time to time, checking the property and making mental notes of all the little tasks and jobs that need doing.
'*Those weeds are starting come up over there…. Jack needs a groom… that post is a little wobbly… this section of the gate needs painting. That fence could also do with a new coat of paint… maybe I will paint it white…or what about light blue…?*'
He approached a section of the garden now. There were several greenhouses here, many of the flowers which originated from distant lands, he grew here, raising them from seeds he bought at the market. The doors of the greenhouses were open, the glass which made up the structure was tinted blue, so as not to be a potential danger to flying birds, insects, and any other creature that flies. Vladislav entered the greenhouses, one by one, studying the plants there. He went to fetch a watering can, ensuring the soil was suitably moist. He also checked the foreign flowers that had grown large and strong enough to be moved outside.
Vladislav held his hands behind his back, leaning forwards and observing the exotic flower he had moved outside.
It was thriving.
Greatly pleased with himself, Vladislav nodded, straightening up and turning away.
By the time he entered the home, and the kitchen, he found Beatrice waiting for him.
'There you are' she grinned. 'You're just in time for tea.'
Vladislav placed the pots of paint on the table. He had two pots of paint, each of a different colour. He also carried a mini-bucket, inside of which were several different types of brushes and some thin pieces of fabric, to protect surfaces from drips.
'It's a warm day outside' Vladislav noted.
'Warm enough to dry a fresh coat quickly?' Beatrice said, noting the things he had carried. She raised an eyebrow with a smile. 'Is that our next job?'
'Certainly, it is.'
'What did you want to paint?'
I wanted to start with the gate at the side of the house, the one near the apple tree. I want to change the colour to red. I think it would be more vibrant.'
'Sounds nice. Why don't you make a start?' Beatrice suggested. 'I'll bring out tea for both of us. Do you want cream cake or shortbread?'
'I'll have the shortbread' Vladislav replied. 'I think the cream would not be a good thing to take outside.'
'You make a fair point' Beatrice said, turning back to the tray she had been preparing. 'You get started then and I'll be out in a moment.'
Vladislav paused, staring over at her.

‘Hm?’ she glanced around, noticing this. ‘What is it?’
He approached her, touching her face tenderly. ‘You just look so pretty’ he said. ‘The way the sunlight shines on you…it makes you look like an angel.’
‘A patchwork angel’ Beatrice grinned, taking his hand, and squeezing it before turning away again. ‘Now get going’ she told him. ‘Or you’ll be in my way.’
‘Of course,’ Vladislav hastened, beginning to chitter. ‘I’ll be waiting for you outside. And don’t keep me waiting for too long’ he added.
Beatrice only chuckled at this, before telling him again.
‘Get along’ she said. ‘I can’t work in this tiny kitchen with your big frame in the way.’
Upon hearing this, Vladislav scurried out of the home, moving as fast as his tall frame would allow. He had taken the paint and bucket with its contents with him, leaving the front door open.
Beatrice let out a sigh, her stomach finally settling once she had finished chuckling. The breeze coming through the open door, down the hallway and into the kitchen, was cool and refreshing. Her eyes were shining bright, and she wondered briefly to herself…
‘*When did I die? For I have surely come to heaven…*’

A short time later, Beatrice left the home, carrying the tea-tray before her.
Seeing her, a nearby deer shuffled over, nibbling her dress.
‘Stop that’ Beatrice scolded playfully. ‘I’ve fed you already. Now off with you, I’ve things to do.’
She continued on her way, the deer staying where it was for a moment, before flicking its ears and wandering off to see what else caught its interest.
Beatrice found Vladislav, greeting him with a smile and a nod; she placed the tray on a nearby table, a little circular garden table they often used. It seemed to continually move locations throughout the property, depending on where they were working on that day, or where they decided to sit.
A short distance away was Freya, watching them both lazily, from her patch of dirt. She loved exploring and wandering all over the grounds. Though she always stayed away from the hives. She would not touch the bees. She had already tried once to investigate, and had quickly learned her lesson, returning home looking swollen and sad. She now recognised them clearly, and remained cautious when she heard them buzzing nearby.
‘Have you seen the flowers?’ Vladislav asked Beatrice as she knelt beside him on the ground, watching him paint the gate slowly. ‘See how they thrive.
‘Yes. It’s nice to see the bees have settled in.’
‘I have to praise you again for suggesting the bees, it was very clever of you to think of that, and so foolish of me to oversee such a thing.’
‘It’s no problem’ Beatrice grinned, tucking the skirt around her. ‘Although it *was* very clever of me, wasn’t it?’ she added rather smugly.
Vladislav began to hiss in amusement.
‘I wonder if you’ll be able to get back inside’ he said, ‘with how big your head has become.’
The both of them began to laugh together, or more accurately, Beatrice laughed; Vladislav hissed, which was how he expressed his mirth.

They sat on the grass together, and spoke happily together at times, at other times, they sat in comfortable silence.
'You know' Vladislav voiced after a time, 'your Jingles has been restless lately.'
'Jingles?'
'Yes. We haven't gone riding in a while' Vladislav said. 'I think they would both appreciate it.'
'I think all four of us would appreciate it' Beatrice said. 'You could show me more of the surrounding land, places I've not been to yet…'
Vladislav turned towards her.
'That sounds lovely' he said.

## Chapter Nineteen
## Mila

Later that same day, Beatrice was readying the horses.
'Boadicea' Beatrice giggled, 'stop trying to get into my pockets. I don't have anything for you right now. I'm trying to fix Jingles's saddle.'
'Silly mountain' Vladislav said, stepping into the stables and extending his hand towards Boadicea. 'You don't realise your own strength.'
'He doesn't mean to be pushy' Beatrice smiled, watching as the great Shire crunched at the apple resting on Vladislav's open palm. 'We must seem so small to him.'
'Don't worry' Vladislav said to Jingles, who awkwardly tried to shuffle closer towards him to get a treat. 'I've got one for you too.'
Vladislav produced a second apple, seemingly from thin-air, holding it out to Jingles, who ate it with great satisfaction.
'Are you ready?' Vladislav asked Beatrice.
'Are you?' she replied, grinning.

Just before leaving the property, Beatrice waved to Jack, calling out her farewells to him, before they made their way.
They went riding, and Beatrice travelled furthest from her home than she ever had before.
They rode through the trees, across the beach, beside the cliffs, looking over the world,
Beatrice and Vladislav stood side by side, mounted upon their horses.
'I never realised how big the ocean really was' Beatrice said, 'how vast the world is…it looks like so much more from up here.'
'I'm glad I can share these moments with you' Vladislav said to her. 'Building these memories…it's been so wonderful.'
'It has.'
Vladislav turned to her.
'Are you hungry?' he asked.

They had been riding for several hours, and all four of them desired rest. And so, they moved away from the cliffs, and backwards to the woodlands, where the wind could not reach, where the air was still.
'Lovely' Vladislav said, finding themselves in a clearing. 'We shall rest here.'
They dismounted their horses, letting them roam free.
Vladislav lay a blanket out on the floor for them to sit on, as Beatrice began to rifle through their bags.
That sat, ate sandwiches, and drank water from the flask. The silence between moments of gentle conversation, were comfortable, and familiar, and pleasant.
And Beatrice felt so happy.

Vladislav shuffled the blanket closer to one of the trees, leaning back against it and becoming still, the lights in his eyes went out as he rested, closing his eyelids, or whatever was the equivalent for him.
Beatrice leant against him, and together they snoozed for a short time, until Beatrice heard a little shuffle. Opening her eyes, she saw a wild rabbit.
It was smaller in size, maybe a juvenile. It had come close to Beatrice, tentatively hopping forwards, sniffing her shoes inquisitively.
Beatrice slowly lifted her head, staring at it curiously.
*What a cute little bunny*, she thought.
The rabbit sat back on its haunches, sitting up as rabbits usually did, its front paws pointed down, ears still, nose twitching. It stared into Beatrice's eyes, considering her.
And Beatrice in turn, did the same.
*Surely this isn't a wild rabbit*, she pondered. *I've never seen one so comfortable with humans.*
Beatrice glanced towards Vladislav, who remained utterly still. She looked back at the rabbit again.
*I wonder if it will let me pick it up.*
Beatrice leant forwards, moving slowly so as not to frighten the rabbit.
She was able to rise to her feet. The rabbit still remained in place. It seemed to be losing interest in her, sniffing at the ground instead.
Beatrice took a small step forward, pausing. The rabbit was nibbling a blade of grass now.
Beatrice leant forwards, reaching for the rabbit with both hands, intending to grasp it gently.
She was close, but it hopped out of reach at the very last moment.
Beatrice straightened up, staring at the rabbit, who stared back; watching her now, its nose still twitching.
She took another step forwards, reaching down again. The rabbit hopped away. Beatrice took another step. Once more the rabbit hopped away.
Beatrice began to follow the rabbit, who zig-zagged this way and that.
Eventually the animal decided to stop moving, letting Beatrice approach.
She was able to reach down, taking the rabbit gently in her hands and lifting it. Beatrice cradled the animal in her arms, holding it to her chest.
The rabbit seemed utterly calm, relaxed in her arms. It was looking around now, perhaps making the most of this new vantage-point.
She held it close, simply gazing down at it for a few moments, until something distracted her.
Beatrice felt something disturb her hair, a faint breeze.

She turned, seeing a face before her, a face that was upside-down, a person that was dangling playfully from a branch.
Beatrice's eyes widened, and she froze, staring back at the face that grinned at her.
Upon noticing this new figure, the rabbit jumped out of Beatrice's arms, turning to face the being, standing on its hind-legs as if to try to reach her.
Without breaking eye-contact, this new being turned her body around, returning to the ground, and doing so in one fluid motion.
The moment her feet touched the grassy earth, the rabbit began to jump, leaning against the being's leg.
The being smiled, kneeling on the ground and opening her arms, forming a sort of cradle for the rabbit to relax in, which it did so immediately.
The being rose to her feet now, still maintaining eye-contact with Beatrice, who stared at her as if in a trance. She felt no fear, despite the initial surprise, she felt completely calm, as if she were under a spell.
'Mila. There you are. I thought I sensed your presence.'
Vladislav had appeared, and at that very moment, the rabbit leapt out of the being's arms, hopping away.
'My magic is still stronger than yours' Vladislav noted, 'even without trying.'
The being, whose name it seemed was 'Mila,' opened her arms wide, turning towards the great mage. She pranced towards him, her movements bizarre, almost as if she were moving underwater.
She and Vladislav embraced, and Beatrice was able to get a better look at this woman now.
She was dainty, small in comparison to Vladislav. She noticed how this new being seemed to drown in Vladislav's wide sleeves and great cloak, much like she did when they embraced.
The woman had thick-curly hair, that was light-green in colour, and little horns protruding from her skull. They were small and pointed, resembling goat-horns.
'There's no need to be afraid' Vladislav said to Beatrice. 'She is just a friend.'
'I am not afraid' Beatrice replied.
'Of course you're not' Vladislav nodded.
Mila glanced towards her, still embracing Vladislav. Her expression was playful, teasing, knowing, but friendly.
She finally released Vladislav, turning to face Beatrice fully now.
'So are you… Vladislav's mate?'
'What?' Beatrice blurted, going red. 'No no no, it's nothing like that. He bought me.'
'Oh, I see. So you're his pet?'
'No no' Beatrice fumbled.
'Pleasure?'
'No!'
'Servant?' Mila suggested.
Beatrice felt herself burning up, chest getting warm, palms itching. She pursed her lips, words caught in her throat.
'Now Mila' Vladislav said, leaning over her, placing a hand upon her shoulder. 'Beatrice isn't used to so many questions. She is just a companion, a friend. My friend, my room-mate.'
'You share a room?' Mila asked quizzically, tilting her head up at the mage. 'You share a bed?'
'We share a home' Vladislav said sternly. 'That's all you need to know.'
Vladislav looked towards Beatrice.

‘I’m sorry’ he said to her. ‘Mila isn’t exactly human. She doesn’t have the same social skills and subtlety that you’re used to.’
‘She’s not human?’ Beatrice echoed.
‘No. She is not.’ Vladislav removed his hand from Mila. ‘She is a forest spirit.’

## Chapter Twenty
## Goodbye

Beatrice knelt in the grass, petting the rabbit that had hopped out of the underbrush.
It was different to the one that had appeared before. This one was larger, a little lighter in shade, but just as curious and relaxed. This one did not run at the sight of Vladislav. He at this time, was standing a short distance behind Beatrice, watching her with warm eyes. Behind him, further into the sheltered woodland, the forest spirit Mila was doing handstands. Her posture was refined, her body lean and muscular like that of an athlete. She moved slowly and with ease, splitting her legs in the air, maintaining her pose for a time, before craning both her legs over her head; touching the ground with her heels, before rising to a stand. She moved so fluidly, almost like she was underwater.
‘So that’s why the rabbit didn’t run away’ Beatrice said. ‘They are calmed by the forest spirit.’
‘Yes well’ Vladislav said, glancing towards Mila, who was doing stretches now. ‘She had no control over it. It’s difficult to explain without going into the details of how magic works, how it effects the air and the particles and the environment… it is simpler to just say, that all creatures feel calm around her. She is a forest spirit. They love her, like a baby loves its mother.’
‘But why did that first rabbit run away when it saw you?’ Beatrice asked.
‘I uh….’ Vladislav pondered for a moment. ‘My magic is quite strong, my aura. Another wizard, sorcerer or other magical or spiritual being would be able to senses it.’
‘Are you saying that young rabbit is a secret wizard?’ Beatrice frowned up at him.
‘Not at all’ Vladislav waved away. ‘But you know they say that animals have a sixth-sense, or have ways to detect things that many people do not…like sensing an earthquake before it happens…’
‘What’s an earthquake?’
‘It’s when the floor is angry’ Vladislav answered simply. ‘I’ll show you a book about it when we return home.’
‘You really do have a book on every subject’ Beatrice sighed.
‘I try to’ Vladislav said with pride.
Beatrice rose. The rabbit sniffed around a little, before hopping off and out of sight, continuing with its own business, whatever rabbits do.
‘Anyway’ Vladislav went on, looking towards Mila now, who stood with her back to them, observing a little bird who was perching on her finger.
She was smiling, closing her eyes. She brought her hand closer to her face, and the little yellow bird nuzzled up to her cheek, seemingly adoring her, exactly like Vladislav had described.
It was as if the bird loved the forest spirit like a mother.
‘We’ve been friends for many years’ Vladislav said. ‘Mila and I.’
‘I am glad we happen to run into each other’ Mila voiced then.

‘You mean you weren’t looking for me?’ Vladislav asked.
‘No’ Mila said, moving her hand away from her face.
The bird took off, though it didn’t go far. It settled in one of the nearby bushes, and watched the scene from there.
‘Our paths are intertwined’ Mila said to Vladislav. ‘It’s no wonder we met today. I knew if I were to wander in these woods on this day that I would find you.’
‘Why?’ Vladislav asked.
‘I need to tell you something’ Mila said, moving closer to him. ‘I’m going away. I’m leaving these lands to find my family. I won’t be returning here again.’
‘Never again?’
Mila shook her head slowly, closing her eyes.
When she opened her eyes again, her look was distant, out of focus.
‘I’m going to try to find my family’ she said again. ‘The birds told me a few days ago that their country was invaded. I knew for the longest time that they were in danger, but they couldn’t just move to another home…not like I can. I need to find them. I need to know if they are still alive. By the time I heard about the invasion from the birds, the news was already several months old.’
Vladislav was silent as he processed this information, after a time he spoke.
‘I can send you there’ he said to her, ‘I can send you wherever you want to go, by magic.’
‘No’ Mila shook her head. ‘I need to travel by foot, as I always have. You know that.’
Vladislav approached her, and the two embraced.
‘It’s likely we will never meet again’ Mila said to him. ‘I just wanted to say *thank you*.’

Mila left shortly after that, and Beatrice approached Vladislav, seeing what looked like tears resting on the sockets of his eyes.
It was the only human emotion he had shown so far. The only one that might have been recognised.
‘Are you alright?’ she asked him, concerned laced in her voice.
‘Yes’ Vladislav answered levelly. ‘I am just…’
‘What is it?’
‘Fear of the unknown.’
Beatrice stared at him, before looking away again.
‘What did she mean when she said that she’s travelling to another planet? I didn’t understand.’
Vladislav reached out to her, putting his arm around her shoulders.
‘Don’t worry about such things’ he said. ‘Let’s just go home.’

## Chapter Twenty-One
## Happy

Vladislav was silent on the way home. The day grew late. Beatrice unsaddled the horses, and put them back in their separate stalls for the night. She went about the property, feeding the other animals and refreshing their water and bedding, before finally returning home.
Once she and Vladislav had a quick meal, Vladislav went to bed early.
Beatrice entered his room, bidding him goodnight before pulling the sheets up to cover him.
'I am not a child' Vladislav sighed wearily.
Beatrice did not respond. She only smiled widely down at him, before squeezing his hand and stepping away.
'I'm going to have a quick wash' she told him; 'then I'll be going straight to bed. I'll try to be as quiet as I can.'
'Don't worry too much about it' Vladislav said, turning away as he rolled onto his side. 'I am sure I will sleep heavily tonight.'
Beatrice smiled again, closing the door quietly, before moving over towards the bathroom. Freya immediately leapt out at her from around the corner, pawing at the hem of her dress before running away again.
Beatrice giggled.
Freya followed Beatrice into the bathroom, playing with her discarded clothes as she bathed, then following her to bed.
Beatrice lay back on her bed, her little cubby-hole beneath the stairs.
She curled up, cuddling Freya to her chest, who continued to purr away happily.
The two quickly fell asleep, and the happy home became still.

## Chapter Twenty-Two
## Wolves

It was several weeks later, that Beatrice shared Vladislav's bed for the first time.
The reason she did this, was out of fear, and she found comfort in being by Vladislav's side.
When Vladislav woke that morning, he was surprised to see Beatrice beside him, huddled beneath the sheets.
The light in Vladislav's eyes went out for a moment, as he blinked at her, processing this new scenario.
He reached out to her with his skeletal hand, caressing her cheek tenderly.
Beatrice woke abruptly with a shriek, eyes wide and teary.
'It's alright Beatrice' he said to her. 'You are safe.'
She reached towards him, sobbing into his chest.
'I've got you' he said, holding her close. 'I've got you…you're alright…'

Vladislav had been caring for Beatrice more in recent days. Her chores had decreased, to give her time and opportunity for her body to heal. Her lessons however had increased.
At breakfast Vladislav cooked for her once again, preparing her tea and orange juice alongside her food.

She sat almost naked now, resting upon a stool, the chair she would usually use for breakfast had been put in a corner. Vladislav stood behind her, removing the old bandages carefully.
He chose to do this during breakfast, or other times when she was eating. It was a good way to distract her while he tended to her wounds, and was giving her fresh bandages.
Beatrice flinched, sucking air between her teeth.
'I'm sorry' Vladislav told her softly, drawing back with the warm-damp cloth. 'I'm trying to be gentle.'
'I know' Beatrice said sadly. 'It's just really sore still.'
Vladislav lowered his hand then.
'Beatrice. I'm so sorry I wasn't there for you.'
'No' Beatrice said, 'please don't do this again. It was my fault for being so careless. I should have not left on my own.'
'I should have warned you about the potential danger. I did not know they were in the area…'
'Please stop' Beatrice said, 'just please…'

What happened a few days prior, is that Beatrice went out riding alone. She had done this several times before, usually riding with Vladislav for the most part, but on this day, it was just herself and her pony Jingles.
She had dismounted to rest for a moment. And that was when the wolves pounced. Beatrice was instantly afraid. Her pony bolting out of fear, as was its natural reaction as a prey animal.
Beatrice was able to escape the predators by climbing into the trees, but not before sustaining injury, mainly to her back and shoulders and her legs. They leapt on her when she turned to run, and grabbed her legs when she tried to climb.
Beatrice sat in the tree for hours, until night fell, but still the wolves lingered, waiting for her to tire, to fall out of the tree. They stayed at the base, simply resting, simply waiting.
And that is when Vladislav found her, using his magic to send them away, which they did as fast as they could, yelping and fleeing in all directions.
Beatrice lifted her head, eyes teary as she saw Vladislav levitating in the air before her.
'Vlad…'
She reached for him, trembling.
He caught her before she fell, holding her close.
'Thank the gods I found you…' he said. 'Thank the gods…'
He tended to her injuries that night, washing the blood away.
'I was so worried' he had said to her.
Beatrice slept and rested, regaining her strength, and calming her mind.
Once Beatrice was safe, Vladislav went out again to find Jingles, doing so a few hours later. He brought her home safely.
She was uninjured, though shaken.
And Beatrice, though hurt, had survived this encounter.
'You're safe now' Vladislav said to her, caressing her cheek as he leaned over her bed.
And that was when she developed a fear of dogs. Even Jack, who had never so much as growled at her, caused her to freeze up and tremble.
'I hate them' Beatrice had said, 'I hate them…'
'Don't feel that way' Vladislav begged of her, 'it was not their fault. They act only out of instinct, and not malice. It's simply in their nature.'

Later one evening, Beatrice was reading to Vladislav. She was now able to read with no difficulty at all, pausing only at words she had never seen before.
'…this claim exemplifies the naturalistic fallacy by arguing that the way things are implies how they ought to be. It is like saying that if someone's arm is broken, it should stay broken. But 'is' does not imply 'ought.' Evolution is descriptive. It tells how things are, not how they should be.'
'Excellent' Vladislav said, as Beatrice closed the book she was reading from. 'Really excellent. You've come leaps and bounds since the first day. I'm so proud of you!'
'Thank you. It's thanks to you I've come so far.'
'Circumlocution' Vladislav said to her abruptly.
Beatrice was silent for a time.
Circumlocution' she repeated. 'An indirect way of saying something in a roundabout way, with unnecessary words with lots of rambling.'
'Exemplary.'
Vladislav sat back in his chair, stroking Freya who was curled in his lap.
They sat peacefully for a time, before the silence was broken.
'I think you need to meet my friend' Vladislav said out of the blue.
Beatrice raised her head slightly, pursing her lips.
'Your friend?'
'Yes.'
'Who?' Beatrice asked. 'Why?'
'Nothing you need to worry about' Vladislav told her. 'Just a little trip to visit my friend, a trip I would like you to come along with.'
Beatrice was about to question him further, but Vladislav, perhaps in pre-emption, quickly picked up his knitting needles and yarn.
'Don't bother me with such questions now' he said hastily to her. 'I have to concentrate to make this thing.'
'What are you making?' Beatrice asked.
'A crochet snake' Vladislav said proudly.
'Another one?'
'I like to make different breeds' Vladislav said, his eyes burning brightly. 'You should try it.'
'Maybe another time' Beatrice said. 'I think I'll find a children's book to read. I'm in the mood for something light and easy to read after that. I think I'll read the book about the joyful jester.'
'Excellent choice. Maybe you can read it aloud to me.'
'If you would like…'
'I *would* like' Vladislav said cheerily. 'Could you bring some biscuits on your way back? And maybe some tea? That would be just lovely.'

## Chapter Twenty-Three
## Bessie

Some days later, Vladislav decided that it was time.
‘Today is the day’ he said to Beatrice over breakfast.
‘Today is the day for what?’ she asked.
‘Today is the day’ Vladislav clarified, ‘that we visit my friend together.’
‘Your friend’ Beatrice mumbled. ‘Yes, you mentioned this a while ago.’ Beatrice paused in thought. ‘You never told me anything else.’
‘Well…’ Vladislav said, ‘what would you like to know?’
‘Why are we visiting this person? Why do you want me to come along?’
‘Hmmm’ Vladislav pondered. He was silent for a moment, as if wondering where to begin. ‘He is a good friend of mine’ Vladislav simply replied. ‘I have not seen him for a while, and I miss him very much, and his family.
‘He has a family?’
‘Yes. He has a wife, and a daughter.’

Later that morning, while Beatrice was feeding the fish, Vladislav brought the ox named Spud in from the field, bringing him to one of the barns and hitching him to the carriage.
Once he brought the carriage out, he spent some time packing some provisions, mainly clothes and food.
Just as Vladislav had placed the last of the bags at the back of the carriage, Beatrice made an appearance.
‘Ah. There you are. How are the fish?’
‘They’re fine’ Beatrice spoke slowly. She paused. ‘Are you sure it’ll be ok to leave for so many days?’
‘Of course,’ Vladislav replied. ‘Jack will keep the place safe. I just know it.’
‘But what about food for the animals?’ Beatrice asked.
‘I will come home daily to feed everyone’ Vladislav reassured her.
‘By magic?’ Beatrice asked.
‘Of course.’
Beatrice looked past him, towards the carriage now.
‘So, um…’
‘Everything is as it should be’ Vladislav nodded proudly. ‘How do your injuries feel?’ he asked Beatrice.
‘Well,’ Beatrice said, reaching to her shoulder and touching her wound tenderly, prodding it lightly. ‘It doesn’t hurt anymore’ she told him. ‘It’s healing nicely, thanks to you. I feel fine.’
‘That’s excellent. Are you ready for a little journey?’
‘I uh…’ Beatrice pursed her lips. ‘How long is the journey?’
‘We should arrive there by the morning’ Vladislav replied.
‘A whole day of travelling?’
‘Yes.’
‘Why don’t you just use magic to take us there?’

‘Because magic isn’t the answer to everything’ Vladislav told her calmly. ‘And besides’ he added joyfully, ‘won’t the journey be fun?’
‘I…’ Beatrice trailed off.
‘Spud is ready to go’ Vladislav said, turning his head towards the ox, who was tethered to the carriage. ‘I think he’ll enjoy this little outing. It’s nice to travel to different places, don’t you agree?’
Beatrice raised her head to Vladislav, forcing herself to grin widely.
‘You’ll be alright’ Vladislav said to her confidently. ‘It’ll be fun. I’ve packed some board games, some books…we can do some lessons. I’ve even packed some pencils and paper. You can continue practicing drawing flowers.’
Beatrice smiled again; this time it was more genuine.
‘I have more fun doing the colouring part’ she told him.
‘That’s understandable. I prefer the sketching part.’
‘Well, that’s perfect’ Beatrice said. ‘You can sketch something and I can colour it.’
‘You see?’ Vladislav said approvingly, his eyes shining bright. ‘You’re already getting excited about it. We haven’t even started our journey yet and we’re having fun.’
‘Well,’ Beatrice said, shyly dipping her head and tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. ‘I guess we just make a good team, don’t we?’
‘We sure do.’ Vladislav bowed to her, opening the carriage door, and offering his hand for her to take. ‘If you would be so willing my lady?’
Beatrice couldn’t help but blush a little, giving an awkward little curtsey, before taking his hand and stepping into the carriage.
Vladislav remained outside for a few more seconds, doing a quick circuit of the carriage, checking the straps, giving Spud a pat, and making sure everything was in order, one last time. Then he entered the carriage, closing the door shut after him with a click.
He then opened the window, leaning out and calling jovially to Spud.
‘Ready our adventure boy! Begin our journey to the dog-farm.’
‘The dog farm?’ Beatrice questioned, as Vladislav sat back in his seat opposite her.
‘Did I say that?’ Vladislav fumbled. ‘I’m suddenly very sleepy. Let me rest now.’ And without giving her chance to question him further, he picked up a blanket from beside him, placing it over his head to keep out the sun. ‘I am resting now’ he said to her. ‘Let me know if anything changes, goodnight.’
‘But…it’s still morning’ Beatrice mumbled.
Vladislav however, appeared not to hear. He was already fast asleep. Apparently.

They travelled in silence for about an hour or so, until Vladislav stirred again, taking the blanket off his head and sitting up.
‘Would you like to play a game?’ he spoke abruptly.
‘What?’ Beatrice glanced back to him, caught off guard.
She had been studying the clouds, admiring the sky outside.
‘I feel like playing a game’ Vladislav went on, lifting the folded table and pulling from his sleeve a box chess-set.
‘Have you had that there this whole time?’ Beatrice asked curiously.
‘Not at all’ he replied. ‘Just a bit of magic.’
He laid out the board in no time at all.
‘Your turn. Remember white goes first.’

‘Alright’ Beatrice said, straightening up and leaning forwards. ‘Let me think…’

They travelled for several more hours, doing various things to keep themselves occupied, from games, to reading, to casual discussions, to comfortable silences.
As evening came, and the sky began to darken, Vladislav found a secluded place to stop the carriage, unhitching the ox and tying him to the end of a loose rope so he could wander a short distance, rest, and drink from the nearby stream.
Vladislav brought out two sleeping mats, some pillows and blankets.
They sat beside the fire, side by side, talking and eating sandwiches, dried meats and cheeses and fruits.
Beatrice told Vladislav how happy she was, despite glancing around her nervously.
‘Don’t be scared’ Vladislav said reassuringly to her. ‘We won’t be approached by any wolves. Spud will protect us.’
‘Spud?’ Beatrice whispered back, glancing towards the ox.
‘Yes. He hates all dogs. Even Jack.’
‘Even Jack?’
‘Yes,’ Vladislav nodded. ‘The both of them tolerate each other only because they live together, though they rarely see one another. They stay in their own separate spaces after all.’
‘I didn’t realise.’ Beatrice paused in thought for a few moments. ‘Why is it that they don’t like each other?’
‘It’s an instinct’ Vladislav said, ‘deeply ingrained in their very being. In the wild, they are often hunted by wolves. This is only when they are young of course, they are relatively safe as they are protected by their mothers and other members of their heard. But the fear and distrust of the wolves and any creature resembling them, remains.
‘I didn’t know’ Beatrice said. ‘It never occurred to me that they exist in the wild.’
‘It can be easy to forget, that even the smallest kitten, puppy, or any animal, is still wild at heart. No matter what. They will always retain certain characteristics.’
‘Like how Freya does that thing with her back legs?’
‘Yes,’ Vladislav nodded. ‘It is thought that domestic cats kick their back legs when they play, as a practice for when they mature and hunt on their own. They kick their back legs to tear open the bellies of their prey.’
‘Nature is really scary’ Beatrice mumbled.
‘It can be.’
Vladislav lay back down on his sleeping mat, the lights in his eyes going out.
‘Sleep with me now’ Vladislav said to her in a gentle tone, ‘and don’t worry about such things. Even if a wolf is able to slip past the ox somehow, I can easily protect us with magic. You are completely safe’ he said to her. ‘I promise.’
‘How does Spud sense a wolf?’ Beatrice asked. ‘Is it only by sound?’
‘His species has an exceptional sense of smell’ Vladislav murmured back. ‘The only way a wolf or dog could get close to us, is if its downwind. We are safe in the forest.’

They woke late in the morning, waking gently, waking slowly.

They enjoyed a tasty breakfast, before helping each other pack up everything and placing it back inside the carriage. Spud was hitched back to the carriage, and they set out on their way once more.
It was sunny for a time at first, thought it rained at one point, and Beatrice felt very cosy inside. Later that day, they arrived at their destination.
Vladislav was staring out the window, recognising their location.
'We are close' he said.
Beatrice looked up from her book, closing it and shuffling towards the window.
Opening it and looking outside, she saw their new environment. It was very open and flat land, unlike the landscape around their home, which was hilly and sheltered.
Beatrice withdrew back into the carriage, opening the hatch at the top and clambering awkwardly through it, sitting atop the carriage now.
The breeze was lovely, and Beatrice felt happy, despite the slight nerves within her now, the thought of meeting strangers.
Vladislav's head appeared in the hatch beside her.
'Ah. There is it. Lovely little area. Don't you think?'
Beatrice did not answer, only pursing her lips.
'Nothing to be worried about' Vladislav said to her, retreating back into the carriage. 'He is a lovely man with a lovely family.'
They continued towards the property. As they drew closer to the front gates, Vladislav leaned out of the carriage window. He made a flourishing motion with his hand, causing the double gates before them to slowly open through magic.
Just before they entered, Vladislav opened the carriage door, stepping lightly out and guiding the ox and the carriage he pulled off to one side.
Moments later, they entered a nearby barn, its front doors left wide open.
'Is he expecting us?' Beatrice asked, noticing this.
'He is' Vladislav replied, unhitching Spud, and leading him towards one of the empty stalls. 'I sent him a message prior.'
Beatrice climbed out of the carriage, drifting slowly further into the barn.
'Where are all the other animals?' she asked. '*Are* there any?'
'He has several horses' Vladislav replied. 'They usually roam free in the area. He rounds them up every so often to check their health, their hooves and such. His main horse has a room right beside his home. You can reach out of the kitchen window to pet him.'
'Sounds lovely.'
They approached the home. It looked at first glance to be cottage, with its thatched roof and small windows, but drawing closer to it, Beatrice could see its true size. The front looked small, but it stretched back far. Sitting at a slight angle to the path, Beatrice was able to notice this.
'It looks very comfortable' Beatrice commented. 'Big though…'
'Remember he has a wife and daughter' Vladislav told her. 'He built this place with his own hands from the ground up.'
'For the three of them?' Beatrice asked quizzically, tilting her head. 'It's large for just three people.'
'Well…' Vladislav said as they continued forwards. 'Sometimes life has different plans.'
'What do you mean?'
'He and his wife love children, and wanted to have a large family. That's why he built his home so large. It has many bedrooms.' Vladislav let out a sigh, pausing for a moment before

continuing. ‘But things did not turn out as planned.’ They reached the entrance porch, with a simple small roof overhead to shelter from the rain. ‘Remember’ Vladislav said, wagging his finger at her, ‘you must never mention this. He was only able to have a single daughter with his wife, Ryder, she is beloved by him.’
‘Ryder?’
‘That is his daughter’s name’ Vladislav clarified. ‘She is his entire world. *Their* entire world. But she is very peculiar.’
‘Peculiar?’
The front door opened abruptly then, startling Beatrice who let out a slight gasp.
Vladislav however was unfazed, almost as if he had known the door would open at that very moment.
Beatrice blinked several times, her mind hurriedly trying to catch up with what she was experiencing. There were jewels floating through the air, moving leisurely as if through water, heading in every direction away from the open door, from behind which they had first appeared.
Beatrice let out a breath.
She turned to her side, studying one of the jewels as it drifted by.
‘It’s an insect’ she uttered, getting a better look.
‘Dragonflies’ Vladamir said, raising a hand and caressing one of the floating jewels in his palm. It lingered there upon his glove for a few moments, before leaving him, continuing its way out into the world, wherever it was going.
‘Vladislav!’ spoke a jovial voice.
The figure standing in the doorway was mature in age, with long flowing blonde hair. He had several silver chains and pendants around his neck, his body donned in a royal blue robe. A handsome man, with a beaming smile.
Beatrice focused on this new figure, staring into his face, before her attention drifted downwards, taking in his clothes, his perfect and dark trousers, and finally his slippers, looking a little out of place.
She tilted her head a little, taking in his footwear. They looked like they were made of leather, with fluffy edges, perhaps rabbit fur.
Beatrice’s attention flickered back up to the man’s face. He was smiling, his attention fixed upon her now.
It was then that Beatrice noticed the dragonflies were gone.
Vladislav who was watching her also now, seemed to instantly know her thoughts.
‘The dragonflies are just made of glass and precious stones’ Vladislav explained. ‘To honour his wife, who loves jewels so much. They have no consciousness.’
‘I thought it would be a nice greeting’ the man explained. ‘You must be Beatrice. My name is Asabourougha’ he said, bowing low to her.
[pronounced: assah – bore – ah]
Beatrice realising herself, straightened up, before giving a little curtsey.
‘I must say’ Asabourougha noted, taking in her patch-work skin, ‘you are nothing like I expected.’
‘A rare jewel’ Vladislav added turning towards her, his eyes burning with pride.
‘Please come in’ Asabourougha invited, stepping back from the door.
They entered, and Beatrice took in the interior of the home. It was cozy, with random splashes of colour. The walls were an off-white colour, and much of the interior was made of neutral colours, but here and there, were places where certain colours stood out brightly. Bright red

pillows rested upon the beige sofas, that was set in the living room just off from the main entranceway. A green blanket was placed over the back of one of the sofas, there were several ceramic vases in the corners, each a single bright colour, together they looked beautiful.
It was cool inside, and comfortable, the floors made of grey stone, the stairs leading to the floor above was made of wood. Upon the walls were several framed pictures. As Beatrice and Vladislav stepped further into the home, guided by Asabourougha, Beatrice noticed several of the pictures appeared to be hand painted. Many were flowers, trees, leaves, sunsets, but mostly they were horses.
'Do you like them?' Asabourougha asked, noticing Beatrice's lingering attention.
'Oh. Yes. The um…style is very nice. I like the colours.'
'Can you paint at all?' Asabourougha asked. 'Or draw?'
'Not very well I'm afraid' Beatrice admitted. 'Not as well as Vladislav.'
'He's had a lot of practice' Asabourougha replied, reaching the sofa, and indicating for them to sit. 'Not to mention having a natural gift for such a thing.'
Beatrice and Vladislav sat upon the soft and comfortable cushions.
'I presume you are referring mainly to his hyper-realistic paintings?' Asabourougha continued.
'Well,' Beatrice began, 'yes. All of them really.'
There came the sound of an opening door.
'Ah' Asabourougha said, turning to face the sound of approaching footsteps. 'My beloved wife.'
A woman appeared from around the corner, wearing a baggy dress of soft material and floral patterns. She wore a white apron over the top, and carried a tray with many things upon it.
'Let me introduce the first love of my life' Asabourougha said, gazing adoringly at her. 'My wife Julie.'
'Jewel works too' the woman said with a modest smile, placing the tray on the low table before them. 'I go by both names.'
'She is my jewel' Asabourougha added, reaching out and grasping her hand.
'Oh stop' Julie chuckled, taking his hand in her own, and sighing tiredly.
Vladislav looked towards Beatrice, who caught his gaze.
'I guess we both have our own precious jewels' Vladislav spoke quietly.
Beatrice blushed a little at that, averting her gaze and dipping her head, allowing her hair to fall over her should, helping to shield her expression.
Julie released Asabourougha's hand, sighing heavily again and tossing her blonde-braided hair over her shoulder, before leaning forwards towards the upon the table.
'Oh no honey' Asabourougha hastened. 'I'll do it, you please sit down.'
'Thank you dear' Julie said, sighing for the third time.
Vladislav raised his head then, hearing another sound.
'Ah!' Vladislav said triumphantly. 'There she is!'
A blonde furry creature bolted into the room, launching itself straight at Vladislav's chest.
Beatrice gasped in fright, shrinking back in her seat, away from the thing.
But Vladislav was hissing, which was for him, was an expression of amusement. Beatrice could not help but noticing also, that his eyes were glowing, which to him, meant that he was happy. This was the main focus of her attention at this time, until she looked down at the creature on his lap, which was positively trembling with excitement.
Beatrice looked back up at Vladislav, and that was when she noticed something else.
He was chittering, his jaw was trembling, and that was an expression of…

'…love' Beatrice whispered.
'Let me introduce you to Bessie' Vladislav told her cheerily.
'Bessie?' Beatrice echoed, staring at the golden retriever. 'That name…'
'That's right' Vladislav said approvingly. 'You remember. She used to be mine. I bought her intending for her to be a guard-dog for my property, but…'
'She would swim in the pond and scare the koi' Beatrice finished.
'That's right! You remember.'
Bessie seemed to have calmed down somewhat, staring at Beatrice with her warm and deep eyes, tongue lolling ridiculously from the side of her mouth.
'Now don't mind her' Vladislav said to Bessie, patting her flank, reverting Bessie's attention back to him. 'You have to be gentle with her, she's frightened.'
'I'm fine' Beatrice automatically responded.
'You remember why I brought you here?' Vladislav asked.
'Uh…'
'I'm holding her' Vladislav told Beatrice. 'Why don't you try to pet her?'
'What?'
Beatrice's palms began to sweat, and her heart quickened a little.
'Go on' Vladislav prompted. 'I'm holding her. You're perfectly safe.'
Beatrice pursed her lips, hesitating.
'Go on' Vladislav said again. 'You need to overcome your fear.'
Beatrice swallowed the lump in her throat, staring intently at Bessie's ridiculous face, as Julie and Asabourougha watched the scene unfold in silence.
'She won't hurt you' Vladislav told her. 'I promise.'
Beatrice let out a slow exhale, trying to calm her nerves.
She straightened up, reaching her hand forwards, her fingertips trembling.
Bessie, realizing she was about to maybe receive some pats, and was currently the centre of attention, began to bark, wagging her tail.
Beatrice drew sharply back.
'She's just excited' Vladislav told her.
'Let me take her outside' Asabourougha said, rising and moving towards the door. 'Bessie, wanna go out? Wanna swim? Come on girl!'
At the sound of the word 'swim,' Bessie leapt off Vladislav's lap, running across the room.
She and Asabourougha vanished from sight as they went into the next room.
There was a moment of silence, before a door could be heard being opened, another pause, then the sound of a heavy splash.
Another few moments later, Asabourougha returned, a smile upon his face.
'She has her own pool' he explained with amusement. 'She loves it. She'd stay in there all day if we let her. But we have to pull her out sometimes. I've had to build a fence around the pool, just so I can clean it without being bothered.'
'O-oh' Beatrice fumbled, unsure of what else to say.
'Let's have some tea' Asabourougha offered.
They relaxed for a time, talking and getting to know each other. Eventually, Beatrice began to relax a little more, like she had been before Bessie arrived.
'Well,' Vladislav said abruptly after a time, rising to his feet. 'I must be leaving now. I will see you later Beatrice, very soon.'
'You're leaving?' Beatrice fumbled, feeling a bit alarmed.

‘Only for a short time’ he reassured, leaning over her; resting a skeletal hand upon her shoulder in a comforting gesture. ‘I need to return home to feed the animals. You’ll be completely safe with my friend. I trust him completely.’
‘But…’
‘You need to learn to feel comfortable without me around all the time’ Vladislav told her. ‘I don’t want to encourage you to be sheltered.’
‘Oh…’ Beatrice mumbled, leaning back in her seat. ‘Alright.’
‘And don’t worry about Bessie, or any other dogs. The other dogs are kept outside, and Bessie will never hurt you.’
‘But what if she bites me?’ Beatrice blurted, unable to stop herself.
‘She would never do that’ Vladislav told her. ‘Bessie is a big softie. And besides…’ he added, stepping away from her, ‘she couldn’t hurt you even if she wanted. She has no teeth.’
‘No teeth?’
‘Yes. She used to love to play and chew on stones. It wore her teeth down completely. She can only eat soft food now.’
‘Oooh…’
‘I will be back soon’ Vladislav said, with a flurry of magic rising from his feet.
And then he was gone.
Beatrice let out a slow breath, trying to calm her nerves.
Vladislav said there was nothing to worry about, and she trusted him completely, like he claimed to trust his friend.
‘I hope you’re not nervous dear’ Julia said to her.
‘Oh, no not at all. I’m…just used to having him close by.’
‘Of course,’ Julie nodded.
‘Let me show you to your room’ Asabourougha said then, rising to a stand. ‘There are many unused rooms in my home, and plenty of space for you. I’ll bring in your bags later.’
‘I’ll bring them in’ Julie offered. ‘You’ve left your carriage in the barn I presumes?’
‘Um. Yes,’ Beatrice said shortly. ‘Thank you.’
‘It’s our pleasure’ Asabourougha smiled. ‘Now please, follow me.’

Beatrice’s eyes roved all about her new environment as she was led through the home, down the corridors and various rooms, up and down several flights of stairs.
‘I hope I don’t get lost’ Beatrice voiced.
‘Oh don’t worry’ Asabourougha said. ‘You’ll get used to it. I have been told before that my home is like a warren.’
They stopped by one of the open doors, and Asabourougha turned to her and smiled.
Beatrice saw the room, what would be her room, for the time being.
‘Vladislav told me he would like you to stay here until you overcome your fears. You are welcome to stay for as long as it takes.’
‘Thank you’ Beatrice gave a shy nod. ‘You are very kind.’
‘You can stay here and rest’ Asabourougha said, ‘or wander freely as you please. For as long as you stay here, our home is your home.’
‘Thank you’ Beatrice said again, ‘but I don’t think I’ll be wandering anywhere right now. I think…I’ll just rest. Today’s excitement has made me a little sleepy.’
‘You’re afraid of coming across another dog’ Asabourougha said, ‘like Bessie.’

‘I…uh...’ Beatrice pursed her lips. ‘Um…’ she grimaced.
‘Don’t worry’ Asabourougha said, ‘Bessie stays on the ground floor. She’s been afraid of stairs since she accidentally fell down one time. She was excited and wasn’t paying attention. She fell pretty hard, all the way to the bottom.’
‘Oh.’
Asabourougha nodded. ‘I assure you; you will be completely safe from her.’
‘Thank you again.’
‘If you ever need anything, come find us. Just head down any stairs you find, and you’ll eventually reach the kitchen.’
‘Alright.’

Once Asabourougha was gone, Beatrice was able to fully take in the room.
It was spacious, with a large bed directly in the centre of the room. There was a thick duvet cover, gentle-pink in colour, with many cushions upon it. The bed faced the window, and as Beatrice approached it, she saw a pretty view of part of the property below her, a garden, currently empty, and completely serene.
‘It’s not so bad here’ she said to herself. ‘But still…such a large house, with so few occupants…it feels sort of…lonely.’
Beatrice turned around, looking back into the room, surveying it from this new angle.
There was nothing else in the room besides the bed, nothing at all, not even curtains. There was a chill in the room, the floors made of smooth and pale wood. It felt like this room was almost never used. Perhaps her being here, was the first time in the longest time anyone had even entered here, besides to clean. Though there was no way for her to be sure of this, Beatrice felt this was true in her heart, there was a sort of aura about the room, a comfortable, yet neglected one.
‘I think I’ll just sleep’ she mumbled to herself.

She lay down, directly onto the bed, thinking about how she already missed home so much, how she missed Freya, and wondering when Vladislav would return.

## Chapter Twenty-Four
## First Morning

She slept peacefully until the following morning, doing so without disturbance.
Vladislav entered her room, moving over to her bed, and sitting upon the edge, doing so slowly so as not to alarm her.
‘Beatrice’ he whispered. ‘Beatrice.’
She turned her head the other way, frowning slightly, facing him now.
He reached towards her with his skeletal fingers, touching her cheek gently.
Vladislav waited, watching over her.

A few moments later, Beatrice opened her eyes. She blinked wearily a few times, before focusing on Vladislav as he withdrew his hand.
'Vladislav' she mumbled, sitting up. 'What time is it?'
'It's eleven am' he said to her.
'Eleven!' Beatrice cried out. 'Why didn't you wake me sooner? I have chores to….'
She broke off, looking about her in confusion for a moment.
'We're not at home' she realised after a few seconds. 'We're in a new place.'
'My friend's home' Vladislav prompted. 'Don't worry, its normal to be a little confused when you first wake in a new place.'
'I can't believe I slept for so long….'
'The journey must have tired you out' Vladislav told her. 'And meeting new people, being in a new environment, meeting Bessie…'
Vladislav's eyes began to burn brightly.
'There is nothing to worry about' he told her. 'I have done all the chores. All the animals are fed and cared for and comfortable and happy.'
'Thank you' she sighed, leaning back in bed. 'I think I must have been more tired than I realised.'
She looked towards him again.
'Where did you sleep?'
'I have my own room just down the hall' Vladislav replied. 'It's nearby. If there is ever a time…well…' his eyes began to glow again. 'My bedroom is not far away.'
Beatrice smiled, gazing up at Vladislav warmly.
'Thank you' she uttered.
Vladislav gave a nod, rising to his feet.
'I'll meet you downstairs' he told her, moving back towards the door. 'Please take your time. There is nothing we have to do, no jobs. We can relax. This is basically a holiday for us.'
Beatrice only smiled widely in reply, beaming at him.
'I'll show you the grounds later' Vladislav said, before stepping out of the room, closing the door to give her privacy.

Beatrice dressed quickly; her belongings tucked away beneath her bed.
She wandered the halls for a time, pausing occasionally to ponder her direction, pursing her lips. She was eventually able to reach the ground floor.
'Ah, there you are.'
It was Asabourougha, he was cooking in the kitchen, or so it seemed.
Vladislav was sitting at the kitchen table, as if waiting for her.
But they were not the only ones to notice Beatrice's entrance.
Bessie, who had been snoozing on the floor, instantly leapt to her feet, rushing over to Beatrice, her tail sweeping back and forth.
Beatrice shrunk back fearfully, clutching her hands to her chest.
But before Bessie could get close enough to Beatrice to touch her, Asabourougha called out to her, shouting a command.
'Bessie! No!'
The retriever slid to a stop, hesitating. But instead of immediately obeying, she began to crawl forwards on her belly, tail continuing to wag, moving closer to Beatrice.

‘Bessie. Come.’
The dog let out a huff, rising to her feet and returning to Asabourougha with her head low.
‘Go to your bed’ he told her, and she did so. Asabourougha then focused on Beatrice. ‘I’m sorry if she scared you, she’s obedient most of the time. Just gets a little excited. I promise she won’t hurt you.’
‘Oh…i-its o-ok.’
‘Oh dear’ Asabourougha said, ‘you’re shaking like a leaf. Come here’ he indicated for her to step forwards, pulling out a chair for her to sit.
Vladislav turned towards her as she sat.
‘I told Asabourougha you love pancakes’ he said to her. ‘He loves to cook.’
‘Ah, yes, I will make that right away’ Asabourougha turned, ‘I’ll have something for you in a few moments.’
‘What was the most recent book you’ve read’ Vladislav said to Beatrice.
‘Um’ she frowned. ‘The Deepest of Seas.’
‘And what was that about?’ Vladislav asked.
‘Um’ Beatrice said again. ‘Wait…’
Her tone was suspicion then.
‘I know what you’re trying to do.’
‘Whatever do you mean?’ Vladislav asked innocently.
‘You’re trying to take my mind off things.’
‘Is it working?’ Vladislav asked. ‘It works better if you don’t know someone’s doing it.’
Beatrice glanced over towards Bessie, who was staring at her intently.
Beatrice grimaced.
‘What’s she doing?’ Beatrice asked. ‘It’s like she can sense my fear…’
‘She’s just begging’ Vladislav replied. ‘She always does it with new people. Just ignore her, or you’ll encourage her bad habits.’
‘Begging for what?’ Beatrice asked.
She looked ahead again, seeing a plate of pancakes before her, with syrup on top.
‘Hu?’
Beatrice glanced around the kitchen then.
Asabourougha was gone, and the kitchen, which had been cluttered with dishes and pots, was spotless once more.
Beatrice blinked, bewildered.
‘Am I going mad?’
‘You’re not’ Vladislav answered quickly. ‘Asabourougha *was* here a moment ago, and he *did* make you pancakes.’ Vladislav turned his head away, towards the window above the sink.
It was open, a horse’s head reaching in from outside, sniffing the counters and nibbling on the tap.
‘There’s the horse I told you about, remember?’
‘I do…’ Beatrice uttered, her mind slowly catching up with all this peculiarity.
‘Don’t think too much about it’ Vladislav told her. ‘He is a man of magic after all.’
‘Can *you* do that?’ Beatrice asked. ‘Whatever it is that he just did?’
Vladislav was silent for a moment. It seemed like he was about to speak, perhaps to leap into an explanation. Instead, he just sighed.
‘Is it more complicated magical-stuff?’ Beatrice asked.
‘Was that a sarcastic-tone I detect?’

‘Of course not.’
Vladislav sighed again, looking down at the table, at the book he had been reading. A large book with a heavy, black- leather cover.
He closed the book, pushing it away from him, placing his hands upon the table before him instead.
‘Is that a book of magic?’ Beatrice asked.
‘Asabourougha and I have very different abilities’ Vladislav settled with. ‘Yes, this is a book of magic.’
‘Can I see?’
‘Of course,’ Vladislav said, ‘but you wouldn’t understand it. Want some tea?’
‘Why does her tongue hang out like that?’ Beatrice asked, looking back at Bessie.
‘She has no teeth’ Vladislav replied.
‘No teeth?’
‘She used to like to play with rocks’ Vladislav explained. ‘A little too enthusiastically.’
‘Oh. How odd.’ Beatrice faltered. ‘Hold on a moment. You already told me that…. Didn’t you?’
‘She likes to play with anything she finds’ Vladislav continued, patting her head as if he had not heard her. ‘There are a lot of rocks at the beach nearby.’
‘Oh’ Beatrice said again, brow furrowed. ‘My mind just feels so muddled at the moment.’
‘So how about that tea?’
‘That would be lovely,’ Beatrice said, lifting her fork to eat her pancakes. ‘Thank you.’

A few moments later, Vladislav had tea prepared for both of them, sitting at the table once more.
Beatrice bought the cup to her lips, breathing in deeply.
‘Mmmm. Smells delicious.’
‘It’s earl-grey.’
Beatrice took a tiny sip.
‘Ah. Hot.’
She placed it down on the table.
‘I think I’ll let it cool.’
‘While you wait’ Vladislav suggested, ‘why don’t you try to pet her again?’
They both turned to stare at Bessie.
Bessie, who had been staring at the both of them hopefully, suddenly began to wag her tail, seeing that she had been noticed.
‘I uh…’ Beatrice pursed her lips.
‘Don’t worry too much about it’ Vladislav told her. ‘If you’re not ready…’
Beatrice let out a slow breath.
‘Just thinking about it makes you nervous doesn’t it.’
‘Yeah’ Beatrice grumbled.
‘Give it time’ he told her reassuringly. ‘It’ll be ok.’
Bessie stopped wagging her tail.
Vladislav paused then.
‘Aren’t you going to read the book?’
‘Why would I do that?’ Beatrice answered, lifting her cup to her lips, and sipping delicately. ‘I wouldn’t understand it.’

Vladislav began to hiss, his shoulders shaking, much like a human's would when they laughed.
'Well, that's one thing you have in common to humans.'
'Are you studying me again?' Vladislav asked.
'Of course not.'
'Are you ready to go outside then?' Vladislav asked her. 'I want to show you the grounds, it's very different to what you're used to at home.'
'The house itself is so different to what I expected' Beatrice said, gazing about the kitchen. 'Everything is so open and spacious.'
'The grounds are a lot like that too' Vladislav said. 'Everything is more open, the gardens… the beaches… the plains... It's lovely outside. I'm looking forward to showing you around.'
'We're going to see the dogs today, aren't we?' Beatrice asked sullenly.
'That's why we're here' Vladislav told her. 'By the time we return home together, things will be very different.'

## Chapter Twenty-Five
## The Dogs

Once they were ready, Vladislav and Beatrice headed outside.
'It's so pretty out here' Beatrice said, head tilted towards the sky.
It was a cloudy day, and the air was cool and comfortable.
'I think there might be a storm on the way' Vladislav noted.
'You think so?'
'Yeah. I can sense the moisture in the air.'
Beatrice inhaled deeply.
'Now that you mention it' she said, 'I think you're right.'
The first thing they went to see, as it was the closest thing to see, was the horse that had stuck its head through the window.
Asabourougha was there now, and he was grooming the horse.
'Hello there' he smiled to Vladislav and Beatrice as they approached, stepping into the stables, Vladislav closing the door behind them.
As Vladislav greeted his friend in return, Beatrice's eyes travelled downwards, towards the horse's feet. That was when she noticed something peculiar.
'Dragon feet?' she voiced.
Vladislav turned around to face her, Asabourougha glancing towards her too.
'Is this really a horse?' she questioned.
'No' Asabourougha told her. 'He is a chimera.'
'Ooooh' Beatrice realised, her eyes growing wide. 'A chimera…a creature of more than one kind stitched together.'
Asabourougha chuckled, speaking to Vladislav now.
'She is a fantastic creature' he told his friend; 'a rare jewel indeed. Not only in body, but in mind. Where did you find her again? Remind me.'
Beatrice dipped her head shyly, tucking her hair behind an ear, suddenly self-conscious of her patchwork skin, as Vladislav briefly answered how he and Beatrice had met.

Remembering herself however, she raised her head again, seeing Vladislav's eyes burning brightly with pride as he noticed this. He has been watching her closely.
'A chimera can also be an individual whose body is composed of cells that are genetically distinct, as if they are from different individuals' Asabourougha continued, oblivious to the silent communication between the two.
Vladislav had previously told Beatrice to be proud of herself, she had almost forgotten.
But she had remembered, thanks to him.
She didn't realise until that very moment, how much she had grown, and she was so grateful.
'You know' Asabourougha continued, speaking to Vladislav now. 'I heard the most peculiar thing recently.'
Vladislav turned to face his friend.
'There is a fox in a place far from here.'
'There are foxes in a lot of places' Vladislav replied.
'Ah' Asabourougha grinned, 'this one is different. They say this one walks around with a key around its neck.'
'A key you say' Vladislav said, instantly greatly interested, his mind whirring with possibilities and wonder. 'Do you know anything else?'
'I'm afraid not. I only heard it in passing as I was attending to other business at the time.'
Vladislav nodded then.
'Ah, look at the sun' Vladislav voiced suddenly. 'I should be going.'
'Going where?' Beatrice asked. 'What for? And where do you see the sun? We're inside a stable.'
'My dear, so many questions' Vladislav scolded her playfully.
'I'm sorry…'
Vladislav turned towards her.
'I am returning home to check on the animals' he said to her. 'Also, I have the ability to sense the location of the sun, even on cloudy days, even at night.'
'That's amazing' Beatrice breathed. She paused then. 'I would ask how you know, but I'm sure the answer will be beyond my understanding. Let's just put it down to magic.'
Vladislav's eyes began to burn bright, and he began to let out a chittering sound, his jaw trembling as it did.
He leaned over Beatrice then. She looked up at him, expecting him to speak. Instead, he began to fade away.
'He didn't use a portal this time' Beatrice uttered.
And then she smiled to herself, realising that Vladislav had completely forgotten to show her the rest of the property, and therefore the dogs. It seemed the discussion about the fox had truly derailed his thoughts. Beatrice thought for a moment of how peculiar this was, before turning back to Asabourougha, who was continuing to talk, having not realised her distraction.
'There are many different ways to use magic' Asabourougha told her, coming to stand by her side. 'And many different ways to do the same thing.'
Beatrice lowered her eyes.
'He said you were his jewel' Asabourougha said to her.
'Oh. Um, ha ha…' Beatrice chuckled awkwardly.
'You are his jewel' Asabourougha said again, 'like my family is mine. My wife and daughter.'
'I've not met your daughter yet' Beatrice uttered.

‘You will’ Asabourougha said. ‘She is here. She um…’ he broke off with a smile. ‘She spends most of her time with her mother, my wife Julie, my jewel.’ He looked around then, the smile on his face growing. ‘Ah. Here she is now.’
Beatrice turned, seeing Julie approaching through an open window. She looked exhausted and stressed.
‘Everything is fine’ she told her husband quickly as she drew closer.
Asabourougha nodded in understanding.
‘Where is the mage then?’ Julie asked Beatrice, pausing at the window.
‘Vladislav is back at home checking on the animals.’
‘Perfect’ Julie smiled. ‘That means you have some free time?’
‘I suppose.’
Julie stepped inside the stables, moving to stand alongside Beatrice, taking Beatrice’s arm in her own.
‘Do you like any sort of arts and crafts?’ Julie asked her.
‘Um, I do’ Beatrice fumbled.
‘That’s great’ Julie beamed. ‘Let’s go inside then. I’ll show you my craft room.’
‘You’ve a craft room?’
‘Oh yes,’ Julie said proudly. ‘I make all sorts in there, mostly cards.’
‘Cards?’
‘Yes, it’s my hobby. I like to make cards for special occasions. Birthdays, anniversaries, congratulation cards and so much.’
‘That sounds lovely.’
‘I make many over time, and every so often my husband and I go to the market to sell them.’
Julie was beaming with delight when she said this. It was clearly something she was very passionate about.
‘You sell at the market?’ Beatrice echoed.
‘Oh yes.’
This suddenly struck Beatrice as very odd, as she pondered for a moment, how strange the market was to her. It seemed you could buy and sell anything and everything in such a place. From something as innocent as flowers, food, cards, to human lives.
Beatrice pursed her lips then, rubbing her wrists unconsciously, where there once were chains that bound her.
Those events seemed so long ago; she had almost completely forgotten about it. It felt now like it was somebody else’s life, and not her own.
‘We visit the market twice or three times a year, sometimes in the summer, sometimes in the winter, but only when the weather is comfortable. I remember one winter in the afternoon…the market was absolutely beautiful. The stalls were kept warm by many small fires, but the snow continued to fall gently.’ There became a distant look in her eyes, and a faint smile upon her face. ‘It was beautiful. The world really becomes a different place when it snows.’
‘Yeah, it does’ Beatrice said. ‘I like it in the morning especially, when you first wake up and the snow is clean and undisturbed.’
Julie smiled even wider.
‘I think you will like my room’ Julie told her. ‘There’s books and maps and painting supplies... even a bed in case I want a nap. I promise you’ll never get bored.’
‘That sounds lovely’ Beatrice chuckled, as Julie led her back inside the home.

A few hours later, and evening came; it began to rain lightly outside, as Vladislav had predicted. Beatrice smiled, pausing what she was doing to glance through the window and towards the clouds.
'It is so peaceful in here' Beatrice said aloud then. 'I can see why you would never want to leave.'
Julie drew the paintbrush back from her easel, glancing askance at Beatrice.
'I'll light another candle' Julie said, placing her brush down on the side. 'But we might have to stop painting soon, it's going to get dark shortly.'
There came a knock on the door, and Beatrice looked across the wooden-panelled room towards the door.
'Come in' Julie called out.
Vladislav entered the room.
'You're back' Beatrice beamed.
'Absolutely' Vladislav replied, after giving a brief welcome to Julie, who nodded back. 'How have you been doing?' he asked Beatrice.
'Really great. Julie's been showing me how to use different mediums, paints…pastels… Look.' Beatrice lifted her easel; turning it for Vladislav to see.
'Oh, that's very nice' Vladislav said, seeing the painting.
'Why do you sound so surprised?' Beatrice frowned, her tone a teasing one.
'I'm not' Vladislav said defensively. 'I know you're a decent artist.'
'Only decent?' Beatrice scolded.
'Well,' Vladislav said, hissing in amusement. 'I don't want to inflate my own ego, but I doubt you could find anyone who can surpass my skills.'
'You've had longer to practice' Beatrice protested.
Vladislav hissed again, resting his hand upon Beatrice's head.
'It's getting late' he said to her. 'Maybe it's time for bed.'
'I am a little sleepy now that you mention it' Beatrice muttered, putting her easel back down.
Vladislav turned away, facing the large window beside them.
'It will be heavy rain tonight' Vladislav noted.
'Good weather for ducks' Beatrice added.
Vladislav turned his face towards hers, eyes burning bright.

That night, the weather was heavy, as Vladislav had predicted.
The rain was loud against the glass, and the rumbling of thunder from the distance kept Beatrice awake. The occasional flash of lighting didn't help either, especially since there were no curtains in her room to close off the world outside.
After tossing and turning for an hour or so, Beatrice sat up, staring outside. It was dreadful outside, soaking wet, probably cold, not in her room though, where it was cosy and comfortable.
Beatrice threw back the blankets, shuffling off the bed and rising to a stand. The wooden floors were cool beneath her bare-feet, and she stepped lightly across the room.
Beatrice stepped out into the hallway, closing the bedroom door quietly behind her.
It was dim in the halls, a single small window high above was all that kept the hallway from complete darkness.

Gratefully, Beatrice did not need to go far. Vladislav's room was just down the hall, and this is where she headed.
Slipping into his room, she found him fast asleep on his large bed. The walls were wooden panelled, the floor carpeted, and the window smaller, facing the other direction to the ones that were in Beatrice's room. Facing away from the storm.
This room was smaller, the carpeted floor more comfortable for Beatrice.
She approached Vladislav's bed, the lights in his eyes put out.
Beatrice lifted the sheets, moving carefully so as not to disturb him.
She shuffled into the bed and lay down, gazing up at him for a moment, before letting out a contented sigh, closing her eyes and smiling.

## Chapter Twenty-Six
## A Rainy Day

*Later that morning.*

'So, you're having an indoor day' Asabourougha grinned, watching the two with amusement.
'Not necessarily' Vladislav said cheerily back, facing Beatrice with his hands extended.
Asabourougha stepped closer, wearing a peculiar expression.
'What are you doing there?'
'Vladislav is teaching me how to play Patacake' Beatrice explained with a smile.
'Boredom is a terrible sin' Vladislav said. 'No matter what, you can usually find something to entertain yourself. Even the simplest thing.'
'Did you need help with any chores?' Beatrice offered, lowering hands, and turning towards Asabourougha.
'Of course not' Asabourougha waved her away. 'You are our guest. And I want you to relax, be comfortable, and not worry.'
'We could still go out' Vladislav told her.
'In this weather?'
'Don't forget what I am' Vladislav said to her, hissing in amusement. 'While I cannot control the weather, I can direct the environment around me.'

A short while later, after breakfast, the pair were outside, standing in the pouring rain, and yet completely dry.
'Your powers will never cease to fascinate me' Beatrice said, reaching forwards, just outside the ring of magic, feeling the cold patter of rainfall upon her palm.
'There are endless possibilities to magic' Vladislav told her; 'limited only by your imagination, and your own abilities and strength.'

Beatrice giggled joyfully, unable to stop herself, feeling like a child again, during the fewer happier moments in her life.
'I'm glad you're in a good mood' Vladislav said, leaning over her with his arms folded behind his back, 'because we're about to visit the dogs.'
Beatrice lowered her arm, letting out a heavy sigh.
'I was afraid of that' she muttered.
'And you let me forget yesterday' Vladislav said, his tone disappointed. 'You only delayed the inevitable.'
'Well,' Beatrice grumbled, 'at least I was able to get another day to process it.'
Vladislav chucked.
'Come on' he told her, moving away. 'I'll show you the grounds, properly this time.'

They began to explore, and Beatrice was able to get a better look at the land that surrounded the home. Asabourougha's home, his property. It was very different to the one she shared with Vladislav, more spacious, flatter, with fewer trees, and located closer to the ocean. It was pleasant, despite being so different to what she had become accustomed to.
Eventually, and inevitably, they reached the kennels.
Vladislav identified all the different breeds, water spaniels, several newfoundlands, big and hulking black dogs that looked more like bears than dogs. There were several different types of retrievers, poodles, setters, and other water dogs. These were all in large cages, on a part of the property separate from the main house. The cages were spacious with very high fencing, and the dogs only began to bark when Vladislav and Beatrice appeared in their area.
They walked down the wide pathway, cages either side, behind which were many lively dogs. Beatrice was trembling, sweating, her breath in shallow gasps. But she was able to walk the entire path, finally reaching the end.
'I'm proud of you' Vladislav told her quietly.
Beatrice turned to him, smiling widely, tears streaming down her cheeks.

Later that day, and Beatrice was given the opportunity to stay indoors and rest, feeling mentally exhausted and overwhelmed. She had chosen to sit alone in the quiet and peaceful kitchen, doing nothing other than slowly flipping through a picture book, absentminded.
It was a book illustrating various different sceneries, mostly landscapes, beaches and hills and forests. The art was very beautiful and detailed.
Beatrice was happy and content, resting and decompressing.
She saw movement out of the corner of her eye, straightening up and turning towards it.
It was the dragon-horse.
'Chimera…' Beatrice corrected herself. 'That's the second time I've seen you sticking your head through that window.'
The horse barely reacted, only glancing towards her with mild disinterest. It seemed to simply like being in the kitchen, if only partially.
Beatrice watched the chimera for a moment, before her attention drifted towards Bessie.
The well-behaved (at least at this time) retriever was sitting on her bed at the edge of the kitchen, watching Beatrice curiously.

For a few moments, Beatrice considered going over to the dog, thinking of perhaps trying to pet her. But even now she could feel her palms beginning to sweat. The very thought of it caused her anxiety.
Giving up the thought, she simply shook her head, marching up the stairs, wondering what book to read next.
And that was when she saw something peculiar.
Beatrice was just walking past one of the larger windows in the hallway, when she glanced outside.
From where she stood, she could see the shore of the beach. There was a young woman lying there upon the sand, partially submerged in the rising and falling waves. She was resting on her side, leaning on her arms, and crying out in what sounded like true grief.
Alarmed by this, Beatrice blinked in confusion, leaning closer to the window.
She saw the young woman was completely naked. As she watched, another figure appeared, rushing up to her. Beatrice recognised this as Julie, Asabouroughs's wife.
Julie, once she reached the naked woman, fell to her knees, grasping the woman by the shoulders, shaking her.
Beatrice could hear nothing from where she was inside, but it appeared that Julie was trying to comfort the young woman.
'She think's she's a mermaid.'
Beatrice glanced around suddenly, alarmed by the sudden sound when she thought she was alone.
'Oh, Vladislav' she sighed, turning back to the window. 'It's you.'
Vladislav stood a few steps back from her. He appeared to be gazing out of the window as she was.
'What do you mean she thinks she's a mermaid?' Beatrice questioned.
Vladislav let out a sigh, dipping his head.
He moved over toward a wooden bench that sat in the hall, sitting down upon it.
'Come and sit with me' he told her, 'I will tell you what is going on.'
Beatrice did as she was requested, taking her place on the bench beside him.
'I am sorry about this' he began.
'Sorry about what?' Beatrice asked.
'There is nothing to worry about' Vladislav reassured her first. 'I assure you their daughter is very well cared for.'
'She's their daughter?'
'I was hoping that you would not have to see her. She has been deeply disturbed for a while now. It wasn't so bad when she was young, but now she's maturing, her body going through…*those* changes' he finished awkwardly. 'Well, it's a great strain on both her mind and her body. She doesn't know how to cope, neither do her parents. She often tries to drown herself.' He paused. 'No, that's not an accurate way to describe it' Vladislav corrected himself. 'It's not that she tries to drown herself. It's more that she keeps trying to swim away, because she thinks she is a mermaid. But the problem is that she cannot swim. That's why there are so many dogs here on these premises. It's for her protection. Many of the dogs here are water dogs, and are trained, especially for her.'
'Oh' Beatrice uttered, eyes going wide in disbelief and shock. 'I had no idea.'

‘Some of the dogs are trained to pull people out of the water’ Vladislav continued, ‘others are trained as alert dogs. She is closely monitored, but sometimes she still manages to leave the property. It’s impossible to watch her around the clock.’
‘To do all that…’ Beatrice whispered, ‘…they must really love her.’
‘They do’ Vladislav nodded. ‘Their children are everything to them.’
‘Children?’
‘She has an older brother.’
Beatrice paused.
‘Where is he?’ she asked.
‘I don’t know’ Vladislav answered in a quiet tone. ‘Last I heard, he was travelling to distant lands, searching for someone who might be able to help his sister. Doctors, scholars, psychologists, unknown people, anyone.’ Vladislav paused again. ‘I can only assume he’s still out there trying. I dare not ask however.’
Beatrice furrowed her brow, staring at the floor between her feet, before lifting her attention back at Vladislav.
‘Why does she think she’s a mermaid?’
Vladislav shook his head. ‘She has had a normal childhood; her brother was never an issue. They’re just eighteen months apart in age, he is the older child, and was always her protector, he still is even now.’ Vladislav sighed deeply, ‘I think this all just happened gradually over time, until it became as bad as it is today. When she was younger, her strange behaviour was dismissed as her having an over-active imagination. No one’s been able to work out this mystery. Though perhaps someday…’

## Chapter Twenty-Seven
## The Night before the next Journey

It was later that very same day, that Beatrice was able to finally touch Bessie.
The happy dog wagged her tail merrily, savouring the attention
‘This… isn’t so bad’ Beatrice said to herself.
‘What was holding you back’ Vladislav told her, ‘was the fear itself, more than the actual action.’
‘You’re right’ Beatrice said, finally drawing her hand back and straightening up. ‘You’re always right about everything.’

A few more days passed, and gradually over time, and with increasing exposure, Beatrice overcame her fears. She grew to love Bessie, and began to miss Jack, and the other animals.
One day, Vladislav told her, ‘our time here is coming to an end, you’ve overcome your fears. Soon we’ll be going home.’
For some reason, this made Beatrice very sad, despite greatly missing home, she didn’t want to leave this place.

‘Don’t worry’ Vladislav said to her, reading her thoughts. ‘We’ll comeback someday.’

They decided, that for their final evening at this place, Vladislav and Beatrice would have a private celebration between them, a meal, then a dance.
Before meeting that day, they stayed in different rooms, separate rooms, in a different part of the manor, rooms closest to the hall.
Well-kept despite being rarely used, this was a beautiful hall, made of wood and stone, with windows made of shining light, basking all surfaces in a golden glow. Magic.
Beatrice and Vladislav met within the hall, standing on opposite ends, the doors closing quietly behind each of them.
Vladislav wore a handsome sweeping suit, and Beatrice wore a flowing ballgown, a pale ocean-blue.
And here, they began to dance, music from invisible instruments enveloping not only their whole bodies, but their entire existence.
It felt like they were dancing in space, like they were not of this planet anymore. It was truly euphoric.

After that, Vladislav and Beatrice met again later that night, back in their night-clothes.
They slept together, though were not physical.
They spoke in whispers of religion, as they lay in bed facing each other. They spoke of human existence, a place outside of time, of love and death and philosophy and so many things.
They spoke late into the night, until they fell asleep.
The next morning, they left early, bidding their hosts a warm farewell.

## Chapter Twenty-Eight
## On the Road

‘Aren’t we going home yet?’ Beatrice asked, upon realising they were taking a different path.
‘Soon’ Vladislav told her. ‘But not yet.’
Beatrice looked back to the other road they could’ve taken, the one that would have led them back home. They were now heading the opposite direction.
‘Then where are we going?’ Beatrice asked, learning back into the carriage, turning away from the open window.
Vladislav was silent for a moment, nothing revealed in his demeanour, but Beatrice by now had come to know him well.
‘You’re thinking about that strange fox again, aren’t you?’
‘What gave it away?’ Vladislav asked, lowering the book he had been reading.
‘Your expression.’
Vladislav turned his skull-head to face Beatrice, no expression shown in his bones.
Beatrice covered her mouth with a hand, unable to hold back the giggles.
‘What’s so funny?’ Vladislav asked.

‘You are.’
‘I don’t mean to be.’
‘I know’ Beatrice said, lowering her hand, and gazing up at Vladislav adoringly. ‘That’s what makes it funnier.’
Vladislav continued to stare at Beatrice wordlessly, causing her to giggle again.
‘Why are you so interested in this fox?’ Beatrice asked him a few minutes later, once she had settled down again.
‘It’s a fox running about with a key around its neck’ Vladislav explained. ‘Asabourougha knew very little else about it, so I *must* see it for myself. I have to find out more.’
‘But why?’ Beatrice questioned, tilting her head at him.
‘Because I do not understand it’ Vladislav answered simply. ‘Also, I have never seen nor heard of such a thing before. I wonder what the story behind it is. I need to learn more, and find out for myself.’
‘I see….’
Vladislav was silent for a time, seemingly pondering his thoughts.
‘It must be a domestic fox…perhaps…’ Vladislav mused, gazing out the window now. ‘Surely someone would not go through the trouble to catch a wild one….and were does the key lead…what does it open….. hmmmmm?’
Beatrice only smiled again, looking back out of the window.
She had no clue what the coming days would offer, but now she was glad that she was no longer afraid. And she was glad, that Vladislav would be by her side.
She would follow him, wherever he went.

## Chapter Twenty-Nine
## The Fox

They travel for several days, taking frequent stops along the way.
Like their journey to Asabourougha’s home, this journey was equally as enjoyable.
‘Do you miss home?’ Vladislav asked her then.
‘I do’ Beatrice said, closing her eyes against the cool and comforting breeze.
‘I’m sorry to take you away for so long.’
‘That’s alright’ Beatrice said, leaning back into the carriage that trundled along its way. ‘They say that absence makes the heart grow fonder. Returning home after all this time, will make it all the more special.’
‘I suppose you’re right’ Vladislav mused.
‘We should stop for a rest soon’ Beatrice commented. ‘Spud would appreciate the opportunity to lie down and eat some grass and hay.’
‘Yes, we will soon’ Vladislav said. ‘I have some carrots for him packed away. He’ll enjoy the treat.’
‘It must be hard for him to pull this carriage for so long.’

‘Perhaps’ Vladislav replied, his tone unconvinced. ‘But he is a powerful ox. His kind were bred to work.’
‘I thought he came from the wild.’
‘Did I say that?’ Vladislav stared at the roof of the carriage. ‘You know… I can’t remember.’
‘Anyway’ Beatrice smiled, looking back out the window. ‘I’m sure he’ll stop if he gets too tired. I just worry about him. Do you think we’ll be passing a stream soon? He might be thirsty.’
‘Well, not to worry’ Vladislav said. ‘If we can’t find a stream, I have plenty of big skeins of water packed away.’
‘Good’ Beatrice said, seemingly satisfied. ‘I would like to give him a carrot later…’ she finished in a mutter.
They lapsed into a comfortable silence, that lasted a few minutes until Beatrice decided to speak again.
‘Why don’t we travel by magic?’
‘I told you before’ Vladislav replied, not looking up. ‘I want to enjoy the world around us. There’s no need to rush to our destination. I prefer to enjoy the journey.’
‘But you’re reading a book’ Beatrice replied.
Vladislav hissed in amusement.
‘I’m reading up on fox behaviour.’
‘I see’ Beatrice said, observing the cover. ‘*The unknown life of forest creatures…*’ she said, reading the title. ‘What have you found out?’
‘It’s best to read it for yourself later’ Vladislav replied. ‘It’s very interesting and I wouldn’t want to ruin it for you. Have you learned any new words?’ he asked then, changing the subject.
‘Hmm,’ Beatrice pondered for a moment before answering. ‘Quisling’ she finally answered. ‘It means, one who helps the invaders of their own country. A traitor.’
‘Very good’ Vladislav replied. ‘I have another word for you. Callipygian.’
‘And what does that mean?’
Vladislav chuckled.
‘What’s so funny?’ Beatrice frowned.
‘Nothing really’ Vladislav answered, settling down and lifting his book once more.
‘So, what does the word mean?’
‘I think it would be funnier to find out for yourself.’
‘Funnier?’
‘In fact,’ Vladislav said, reaching into his cloak and pulling out another book from his sleeve, ‘I have a dictionary right here.’
‘Of course you do’ Beatrice said, raising an eyebrow sceptically, taking it from him. ‘What was the word again?’
About a minute or so later, Beatrice was laughing to herself, closing the dictionary again.
Vladislav had his head lowered to his book, but his glowing eyes were lifted towards Beatrice.
‘You are very funny sometimes’ she said to him.
‘I have no idea what you mean’ Vladislav replied innocently.
They sat in silence for a little while longer until Vladislav spoke.
‘Do you still feel a little fear around dogs?’ he asked her. ‘Any at all?’
Beatrice fell silent in thought, leaning back in her seat and staring at the roof of the carriage.
‘No’ she said at last. ‘Well….’ she hesitated. ‘No’ she concluded. ‘I don’t feel fear anymore, only caution.’
‘Caution?’

‘Towards dogs I don’t know’ Beatrice clarified. ‘And all animals in general. The ones I don’t know I mean.’
‘That is very wise.’
‘I wanted to thank you’ Beatrice said to him.
‘Hm?’
‘For helping me’ Beatrice grinned. ‘It means a lot. I really appreciate you making an effort to help me, to make me better when something goes wrong…for really caring for me.’
Vladislav began to chitter then, his jaw trembling.
‘That’s love’ Beatrice noted with a joyful sigh. ‘You did the same when you first saw Bessie.’
Vladislav fell silent then, saying nothing, before dipping his head again, focusing back on his book.
Beatrice smiled knowingly to herself, before glancing out the window.
‘I just remember another new word I’ve learned’ she voiced, speaking after a few moments of silence. ‘Yataghan’ she said. ‘It’s a curved Turkish sword.’
Vladislav dipped his head silently, the lights in his eyes going out. Beatrice knew he was resting.
She moved from her seat opposite him, going to sit beside him.
Vladislav began to chitter again, for a few seconds before falling silent once more.
She leaned into him, closing her eyes too.
Vladislav put his arm around her, enveloping her in his wide sleeve, creating a haven of safety for her.
And together, the two napped peacefully

## Chapter Thirty
## Fox-call Tower

They approached a grand bridge, made of pale stone. Beatrice leant out the window, seeing they had arrived at a new place. Their destination, at last.
‘We are here’ Vladislav said, without even looking outside.
Beatrice smiled as she felt the fresh air upon her skin, taking a deep breath inwards.
Mixed alongside the scent of the ox that pulled them, were other fresh smells Beatrice had not experienced before. New sensations entirely.
‘It must be the smell of the land’ she voiced aloud.
‘It’s the plant-life’ Vladislav told her without a pause. ‘There are many creatures here that would be new to you, animals too. All sorts of bizarre types of insects, and fish and birds and so many others. Are you familiar with the hummingbird moth?’
‘No’ Beatrice said, glancing back to him. ‘What is that?’
‘It’s a moth’ Vladislav answered simply with a hiss, ‘that looks like a hummingbird.’
‘Of course it is,’ Beatrice frowned in amusement.
‘You will see it soon I am sure’ Vladislav added. ‘You’ll see many interesting things.’
‘I do hope so’ Beatrice mused. ‘I’m already excited.’

She paused then, gazing down at the shallow, gently-flowing river below them, as they continued over the gently-arching bridge.
'The water looks milky' she noted.
'It's a type of algae' Vladislav told her. 'At certain times of the day and night, it could appear that the water is white like milk. At other times, it could be crystal clear. If I remember correctly, it depends on the position of the moon and the season…. And perhaps a few other things...'
'Fascinating' she breathed, eyes tilted downwards towards the milky river. 'I've never known such a thing could be.'
Her eyes lifted towards the tops of the trees now, between which she could see glimpses of other buildings and flowers within the beautifully maintained property.
'I've not even stepped foot off the carriage yet; and I'm already learning new things about these lands.'
Vladislav began to chitter then, his jaw trembling.
'The climate feels different here' Beatrice went on, 'warmer. We must be further from home than I realised.'
'They say time flies when you're having fun' Vladislav added.
'It must be the good company I've been keeping' Beatrice said, shooting a sly grin back to him.
Vladislav dipped his head, as his eyes burned brightly.

A few moments later, the carriage turned off the bridge. Vladislav climbed out of the coach, moving fluidly to the driver's seat.
Beatrice sat back in her seat, hands upon her lap as she continued to gaze out of the window.
From what she could see, it almost appeared like they had come to a miniature city, with several pale-stone buildings visible, clean, and simple but elegant in design. There were no shops here, or people, or any noise besides the gentle wind, a few birdcalls, and the rolling wheels of the carriage. It was like a secret paradise.
A darkness fell within the carriage then, and Beatrice realised they had entered a building.
They came to a stop. The carriage jostled again as Vladislav shifted, slipping off from the driver's seat and opening the door for Beatrice, offering his arm for her to take.
She took it gratefully, stepping out.
Beatrice stretched her body out, much like a cat would do, reaching high towards the sky, before relaxing the letting out a happy breath.
She realised they were inside a large barn. It was incredibly spacious, like a great hall almost, but with hay on the ground, and a more muffled atmosphere.
'It's sort of cosy in here' Beatrice noted as she looked about.
'Do you feel glad to get out of the carriage?'
'I'm excited to begin to explore' she replied.
She glanced behind her now, seeing Vladislav pushing closed the tall door of the barn behind them. It looked like an easy enough task, though the doors were large, they were sitting on great rollers.
'You're closing the door?'
'Yes.' Vladislav replied, moving past her. 'We'll be here for a while.'
'You knew this?'

Beatrice watched as Vladislav led Spud away. The ox seemed to be grateful to be disconnected from the carriage.
'Yes,' Vladislav said, as Beatrice hurried to walk alongside him. 'I travelled ahead to scout the place out while you were sleeping.'
'Of course you did' Beatrice sighed. 'Does that mean they're expecting us?'
Vladislav turned his head towards her. 'They?'
'Oh, come on' Beatrice frowned at him, tilting her head playfully, as Vladislav opened a small door in the corner of the barn, leading them back outside again, Spud following alongside by his bridle. 'We can't be the only ones here. You first heard the news about the fox from Asabourougha' she went on, 'isn't that right?'
Vladislav did not answer, instead silently faced ahead again.
'This fox must be pretty well known' Beatrice continued. 'I wonder how many people are here.'
Vladislav began to hiss.
'You think I am so clever?' she asked him.
'Be easy' he said to her, patting her head. 'You might stumble carrying that heavy pride around.'
Beatrice giggled behind her hand.
'This must be a large piece of property' she said, gazing about at the bright area and luscious trees. 'It's certainly very pretty.'
'It is. We are far away from all places' he told her. 'This is a secluded part of the kingdom. Few people know of it, and even fewer visit this location. Though it's less a secret now than when the dictator was alive.'
'Brunhilde' Beatrice nodded sadly. 'The cruel queen.' She paused. 'The Prince is still missing?'
'Hmm.' If Vladislav was human, he might have frowned now. 'Nothing is known for sure for most people. Some say he's still alive and free now, but as to why he's not stepped up and taken his rightful position as king and leader…well…it's strange.' Vladislav shook his skeletal head. 'I wonder what he's waiting for.'
'What was that in the trees there?' Beatrice said curiously, pointing a finger towards the direction of her distraction.
Vladislav paused. 'I think it's a sort of small lemur. They are common in this area. This garden would produce a lot of fruit for them and their families.'
'Oh.'
They continued along the stone path for a few more minutes, before coming to a stop at a little wooden gate that led to a narrow field. Vladislav pushed the gate open, taking the bridle off Spud and allowing him to plod forwards into the field.
'So, they live in families' Beatrice continued, referring to the lemurs.
'Of up to twenty' Vladislav confirmed.
'Aah' Beatrice sighed, leaning on the wooden fence dreamily. 'That sounds lovely. Having a big family like that…with your parents and all your cousins and siblings…not to mention all the little babies to play with.'
'Sometimes the other members of the family besides the parents care for the youngest ones. You could call them nannies, or babysitters.'
'That is so precious.'

From where she stood, Beatrice could see the edges of the field. It was a decent sized field, and Beatrice could see that Spud would have the space to himself.
'I think he'll be very happy here' she smiled, seeing Spud pause for a moment, before looking around and flopping down on the floor.
'Yes, he's certainly earned it.'
Vladislav closed the gate again, taking a sign that was hanging from it, and turning it around so that it now read *reserved* instead of *free*.
Vladislav walked past Beatrice, who lingered for a moment, watching the ox as he began to munch away on the rich grass, before hurrying after him.
'So where are we going now?' Beatrice asked him.
'We're going to our rooms' Vladislav replied.
'Rooms?'
'Yes. We'll be here for a while.'
'As you said' Beatrice answered simply, not knowing what to expect. 'If the rooms are half as wonderful as the gardens' she went on, 'then I know I'm going to be very content.' She paused for a moment in thought. 'It might be a little difficult to sleep at night' she mumbled to herself.
'Why do you say that?'
'Well, it's pretty warm' she said, tilting her head towards the sun.
'Don't worry about that. The nights are cool here. You'll be more than comfortable here, I assure you.'

They walked for a short time, until something unsettled Beatrice. She didn't know what it was that had alerted her, perhaps it was instinct. But she got the sudden feeling that she was being watched.
She paused, glancing upwards towards a set of stairs, high above them, leading it seemed to an open courtyard.
And there, stood the most peculiar figure.
A tall and shapely being with searing orange eyes, skin as black as coal, great curved horns that looked like they were painted in gold. She had a great scaley lizard-like tail, glistening in the sun like her golden horns. Her tail was bright, looking almost metallic. But beneath her large scales, warm blood flowed through her veins.
'What is that she has in her hands?' Beatrice asked. 'It looks like a lantern.'
'It *is* a lantern' Vladislav answered, having noticed this figure too. 'It's a lantern of darkness. Works just like a flame in the night, but the other way around.'
'So, it covers the area with darkness?' Beatrice turned to him; hands clutched to her chest.
'Yes. Her species…' Vladislav glanced towards the stranger, looking over them now. 'They were meant to live in the dark. She is a night-dragon.'
'A night-dragon?' Beatrice looked back at this strange figure.
'Well…more specifically…' Vladislav corrected himself.
'A chimera' Beatrice finished. 'Just like that horse.'
'Yes.' Vladislav nodded. 'That's right.'
'My name is Razzamatazz' the female being spoke, her voice low and mature.
Despite her distance from them, her voice was clear and easy to understand.
Her mouth looked a little too wide than perhaps it should have been. Her teeth triangular and pointed like that of a shark, fitting perfectly together like a jigsaw when she smiled.

There were porcelain decorative pieces in her jet-black hair, they looked almost like fish-scales. Or gold coins.
Her dress was tight to her form, mostly black with depictions of gold, her shoulders bare, her sleeves wide, and her boots high.
'She's beautiful' Beatrice uttered.
The dragon lowered her eyes down upon them.
She wore a severe expression, and there was a sort of knowledge behind her eyes. Like she was far older than she seemed, with many secrets, perhaps hidden abilities, untold knowledge, and potential danger.
She didn't know why, but Beatrice strongly had the impression that there was more to her than could possibly have been known on the surface.
But there was a kindness about her also, an abstract sort of aura.
'I presume you are here for the fox?'
'Yes, we are' Vladislav declared.
Razzamatazz descended the stairs, never lowering her lantern.
She came to their level. First looking at Beatrice, appearing to study her closely. Before turning her head towards Vladislav, who watched her back in silence.
'Please follow me' she said finally. 'Your rooms are waiting for you.'
She walked past them, her movements silky and fluid.
Vladislav and Beatrice hesitated for a moment, exchanging a glance before looking back towards Razzamatazz.
They followed after her.
'So what is the lantern for?' Beatrice asked in a hushed voice.
'It helps her to see' Vladislav replied.
'What do you mean?'
'She is nocturnal by nature. She is blinded by sunlight.'
Beatrice faced ahead again, staring at the back of her head.
'Strange…'
'Not to her.' Vladislav countered. 'It's perfectly normal to her.'

They continued to follow Razzamatazz through the beautiful garden, luscious, well maintained, and full of colour. Various birds of various colours flitted around, there were bees and butterflies amongst the flowers, amongst other brightly coloured insects. Emerald green beetles, ladybirds, a mantis could be seen…
*There is so much here* Beatrice thought to herself. *And just at a glance…*
After a short time, they passed through an archway made of white stone, with a little waist-high painted gate.
Razzamatazz opened the metal latch, gliding through. Vladislav closed it after them.
They approached a building now, previously hidden from view by the curling trees.
It was a decently sized building, with no rhyme or reason. It appeared perhaps to have been built as a single dwelling. Or perhaps two. With another apartment added onto it, then another, and so on, until it became the size it currently was. In fact, Beatrice could see what appeared to be fresh signs of ongoing construction. Off to one side, was a pile of stone, the same type as that which formed the building. It was resting upon an otherwise unused flowerbed, neatly stacked. There was nothing else there, no tools or anything. But the stone looked like it had not

been there for too long. It was free from leaves and debris and any insect or bird or rodent activity or presence, and appeared to be unaltered by the elements, either the sun or the rain.
'Here is where you will be staying' Razzamatazz voiced then, stopping at the bottom of a shallow set of steps.
Beatrice walked forwards into a little sheltered area, the air cooled by the stones which were left in the shade, the touch of the sun unable to reach. There was a short set of steps to one side, leading to a door, opposite another, like a mirrored effect.
'It's sort of like a foyer' Beatrice mumbled, as Vladislav came up behind her with a key to the room, '…or a vestibule.'
She turned towards the other door as Vladislav unlocked their room.
'I wonder if we have any neighbours' she pondered aloud.
'We do' Vladislav said, pushing the door open. 'A young lady, or so I am told. After you' he added, indicating for Beatrice to enter the room first.
'How proper of you' Beatrice smiled, lifting the hem of her dress, and giving him a little curtsey before straightening.
She paused for a moment before entering, glancing to her side, and thanking the dragon for guiding them.
She saw the strange female character watching her, wearing a curious expression.
It seemed this dragon found Beatrice as unusual and peculiar, as Beatrice found her.
Beatrice only smiled again, sweeping her hair back and tucking it behind an ear, exposing her patchwork cheek instead of hiding it.
Vladislav seemed to notice this brief and silent interaction between the two beings, raising his head silently, eyes burning brightly with pride and joy, before following Beatrice into the room.
She had come so far. It was hard to imagine her now as the timid and frightened slave-girl he had found her as. The outcast and lonely girl who thought herself to be ugly.

The room inside was small and cosy. The door opened into a little sitting room, where there was a small dark-wooden table and chairs. Directly in front of them, opposite the front door, was a glass panel that led to a small balcony. On one side, was another room that led to a small bedroom, on the other was a tiny bathroom, and in the corner, what appeared to be a kitchen, though it was barely larger than a few cupboards.
The room was well shaded and very cool, quite a contrast to the warmth outside.
'It's looooovely in here' Beatrice sighed.
She found herself at the little balcony, sliding the glass door and stepping out onto the shaded area. There was nothing beneath the balcony but short grass and some neat stones, and either side, bushes, giving the room behind the glass some privacy.
Here is where Beatrice could see a tower, modest in size and design, and completely unremarkable in every single way.
'What is that tower over there?' she asked.
Vladislav loomed behind her to observe.
'That is Fox-call Tower.'
'Fox-call Tower?' she echoed.
'Yes.'
'Hm.'
She pondered it, considering the unusual name.
'What's inside?' she asked.

‘I haven’t a clue.’

## Chapter Thirty-One
## Emma

They settled into their rooms, gathering the few possessions they had brought with them.
Before the sky began to grow dark, Vladislav left for a short time, using magic to slip through the portal he had created. As had become his habit of late, he returned to their home to tend to the property and feed the animals. Beatrice waited for him on the balcony, gazing out at the sky. She did not read, nor did she sit. She simply stood, watching the clouds.
As time passed, she saw the sun begin to set, gradually sinking closer to the horizon. Before it could touch the land, Beatrice sensed some movement behind her.
She turned, seeing Vladislav standing there.
‘How are the animals?’
‘All is well’ he replied. ‘And Spud is happy in his field.’
‘You checked on him too’ she smiled, placing her hands together. ‘I’m glad.’
‘We should put ourselves to bed too.’
Beatrice chuckled.

Beatrice woke the next morning as the sun began to rise. She groaned, turning over in bed and groaning some more.
‘Vlad…are you awake….?’
He only made a small noise in response to confirm that he was, just about, though did not open his eyes. His sockets remained dark.
Beatrice sat up, rubbing the sleep from her eyes.
She pulled the thin blankets back, rising and moving over towards the balcony.
The air was cool and fresh, and as she gazed outside, she saw something that piqued her interest.
It was a fox.
It had what looked like a silver chain around its neck, and there glinted…
‘A key…’ Beatrice uttered, ‘it’s *the* fox.’
The one they had travelled so far for, and waited for so long to see.
It was sitting before the chimera, emitting a EHEHEHEHEHEHEHEH sound, so typical of foxes. The chimera, the dragon-lady, appeared to be petting the fox, leaning forwards, perhaps whispering into its ear.
Beatrice watched this scene with curiosity and interest, tilting her head.
‘I didn’t expect to see it so soon…’
The fox appeared to be completely calm and relaxed, and unlike the chimera that caressed it now, seemed to be completely unremarkable.
‘Just a normal fox’ Beatrice mumbled to herself. ‘Perhaps hand-raised…hmm.’

She frowned to herself, tapping the railing of the balcony thoughtfully.
'How strange.'
She turned back into the room, heading to the bedroom.
'I'm going outside for a bit' Beatrice told Vladislav, leaning into the narrow room.
'You're going to see more of the gardens?' Vladislav grumbled, rolling over in bed.
'Yeah. I just want to look around.'
'Alright.'
Beatrice hesitated.
'You're very tired this morning' she noted.
'I slept late last night' he answered. 'I was looking around, talking to people and finding out things…'
'I see' Beatrice smiled. 'I suppose it's my turn now.'
'Hmmm…'
She bade Vladislav goodbye, closing the door quietly behind her before heading out.

Beatrice wandered the grounds for several minutes, admiring the beautiful yet simple architecture, the endless varieties of plants and flowers and trees. Not to mention the creatures, the many little things that lived here in this little paradise.
She saw movement in the branches above her as she went, only a flitter. She saw a flash of brown and black, something furry. She thought that perhaps it was the small lemur Vladislav had mentioned before, but it was too quick for her to get a good look at.
Beatrice wandered around a stone path that gently curved one way, beneath repeated stone archways that created a sort of tunnel overhead, around which were twisting vines and white flowers.
She reached the end of this curve, seeing a final archway, this one wreathed in golden leaves, beneath which was a curtain of ivy.
Pulling this back, Beatrice entered a secluded area. This area was cylindrical, covered above by a blanket of yellow leaves, different in shape and texture to the golden ones. And here she found a woman, sitting with her head bowed, upon the wall of what appeared to be a well, placed in the centre.
The woman raised her head, hearing the shift of the ivy.
'I've not seen you before' she instantly said.
Beatrice stepped out into the little open area. Despite being completely secluded, the area was bright with natural sunlight. Somehow.
'I've just recently arrived. I mean…*we* recently arrived.'
'We?' the woman questioned. 'How many of you are there?'
'Just two' Beatrice said. 'My companion and I.'
'I see. You're here for the fox then.'
'I suppose.' Beatrice stepped closer.
The woman continued to stare.
'You have very strange skin.'
'Some may think so' Beatrice replied without pause. 'My name is Beatrice.'
'Emma.'
Beatrice took a seat beside her upon the wall.
'You're the first person I've seen here… besides from the chimera.'

‘The dragon-lady’ Emma nodded. ‘She is very peculiar.’ She tilted her head then, considering Beatrice, seeming to take in her features more closely.
‘I’ve never seen anyone like you before.’
Beatrice glanced away tentatively for a moment, before remembering herself, and looking back into Emma’s face, instead of hiding away.
‘It’s called vitiligo’ Beatrice explained. ‘There’s something in your skin cells called melanocytes that give your skin its colour. My condition is caused by the lack of pigments in the skin. A lack of melanin.’
‘Oh’ Emma replied, seemingly surprised at this answer. ‘That was a more complicated explanation than I expected.’
‘Well,’ Beatrice went on, ‘I live with a very wise man, a person of magic. He has taught me a lot in the time we’ve lived together.’
‘Is he related to you?’ Emma asked with interest now. ‘Do you have magic of your own?’
Beatrice shook her head.
‘Unfortunately not. He is lucky in that regard. It’s not a skill you can learn, but one you’re born with, like how a bird can fly so easily.’
‘I see’ Emma said.
‘We are not related’ Beatrice clarified. ‘I did not even know his kind existed until he found me. I didn’t even realise magic was real.’
‘You didn’t?’
Beatrice shook her head again.
‘I have lived in a very secluded village before I met him. I spent much of my life working, and received no education. I knew plenty about the weather and the crops and the animals that affected our lives so much. But I could not even read or write before I met Vladislav.’
‘Vladislav. So that is his name.’
‘Oh, listen to me’ Beatrice said, blushing suddenly and covering her mouth awkwardly. ‘I’ve been talking far too much. I’m sorry. I don’t meet other people too often. Vladislav and I live alone.’
‘Like you did before when you were growing up?’ Emma questioned.
‘No.’ Beatrice shook her head for the third time. ‘It’s very different now. Better…’
‘That’s good. Hold on a minute’ she said then. ‘Your companion wouldn’t be that skeletal man now, would he? The one with the antelope-skull?’
‘The very same.’
‘Oh wow. That’s incredible. I could sense the magic emanating from him. He is very powerful.’
‘You can sense magic?’ Beatrice questioned.
Emma chuckled then, glancing away, and flicking her blonde hair with a flourish.
‘I suppose I’ve given myself away now. Yes, I can sense magic. I have some magical ability myself. Nothing too expressive or extravagant. My skills are very limited. They pale in comparison to your companions.’
‘When did you see him?’
‘I saw him wandering late last night’ Emma said. ‘I saw his figure from a distance. At first, I thought it was some trick in the dark. But then he came closer. He was walking on the same path as I was. He was coming towards me.’ Emma shivered then, an automatic reaction she seemed to be unable to control or even notice. Her mind thinking only of the mage. ‘He towered over me, and for a moment I was frightened, wondering what this creature was. His eyes

burning bright in the dark, his sweeping cloak, his proud stride, the way he walked with knowledge and purpose. He was intimidating.'
'He always walks like that' Beatrice smiled, unable to stop herself, for she found this new perspective of Vladislav very amusing and intriguing. 'He is the kindest person, and has done so much for me. I do truly owe him my life.'
'You do?' Emma said curiously.
'I shouldn't say too much' Beatrice waved away dismissively then. 'I don't really like talking about my past.'
'It was not a good one then?' Emma asked.
'Hm.'
'I'm sorry, I didn't mean to pry. Sometimes I speak my thoughts aloud before I have time to think.'
'How did you know we travelled together?' Beatrice asked then.
'Well, you both seemed to arrive at the same time' Emma said. 'And of course a man like that would have a companion like you. You are rare, you know that? I've travelled a lot in my life and have never seen…' she trailed off. 'I'm sorry, I didn't mean to sound rude.'
'It's ok. Vladislav taught me to be proud of who I am.'
'Well, that's good.'
'What about you?' Beatrice asked. 'Did you come here alone?'
'Yes, I came here alone. Well… not entirely' she corrected herself. 'I have a companion also.'
'A friend?'
'No. He's more a worker hired by my family.'
'Oh.'
'Yes, he has many titles. I'm not even sure of all of them myself. He is a soldier and a servant; and now a protector to me.'
'Oh. Is he here now?'
'He's about the place' Emma said dismissively. 'He doesn't follow me around or anything like that, but he often watches me from afar. His room is opposite mine. I feel much safer with him around, as do my family. I don't know him too well though, but I understand that he is greatly trusted by my father. So, I trust him too.'
'Does your family have many…um' Beatrice faltered then, unsure of the word to use.
'We have many people working for us' Emma explained, seeing her hesitation. 'Cooks, maids, soldiers, stable-hands, gardeners…' she listed them off.
'Gosh' Beatrice muttered. 'I couldn't even imagine such a thing.'
'Don't get the wrong idea' Emma smiled, wagging her finger at Beatrice. 'I'm no helpless girl. My father and mother have raised me not to be dependant. I know many things. I can sew and make my own dresses, shoe a horse, I even know how to make a sword.'
'That's incredible. I've never made a sword before.'
'It's something I greatly enjoy' Emma beamed. 'I highly recommend it.'
'I will have to bring it up with my companion' Beatrice mused.
'That will be an interesting conversation.'
'I hope so.'
Emma smiled.
'So, what about your family?' Beatrice asked.
'Well, I have my mother and my father, of course…'

Beatrice observed Emma's demeanour as she spoke, and she noticed the way her eyes shone, the way the edges of her lips curling, her voice rising in pitch.
'...and I have twelve siblings…'
'Twelve siblings' Beatrice exclaimed. 'That must have been quite the crowded home.'
'Not at all' Emma waved her away. 'In fact, we have rooms to spare.'
'Oh wow' Beatrice was able to utter, lost for anything else to say. 'That…must be a big home.'
'Well, I don't know really. To me it sounds just average size, for the number of people who reside there, servants included.'
'I slept in a barn with animals.' Beatrice said.
Suddenly she gasped, going red.
'I um…' she hid her face then, heart pounding in her chest. 'I'm sorry…'
Emma just looked surprised and uncertain. Seemingly unsure of what to say.
It took a few moments for Beatrice to compose herself. Though she eventually did.
'Just, forget I said that…' she pleaded.
'Oh…. ok…'
'Could you…. tell me more about your family…please…who is your eldest sibling? What is your mother like? Do you have any pets?'
'I have a cat.'
'Oh. I love cats.'
'Me too.'
Both of them grinned.
'Tell me about yours' Beatrice said.
'Oh, she is a beautiful kitten. Well…she's not a kitten anymore, but she's still young, about two years old, I think. We have her mother living at home still, she belongs to my own mother.' Emma explained. 'My own cat is called Sylvia. She has a beautiful grey coat and bright green eyes…
Emma continued for a short time, telling of her many siblings and their games they play, her father's teachings, her mother's garden.
'She loves her plants. There's even a forbidden section.'
'Forbidden?'
'Mh hm' Emma nodded.
'It's a secluded part of the garden right at the very back of the property. It's fenced off with tall barriers, warning signs… the gates are constantly held shut under lock and key.'
'Is there a monster there?' Beatrice asked with wide eyes.
'Oh no' Emma chuckled. 'Nothing like that.'
'Then what?'
'It's a poison garden.'
'Oooohh' Beatrice gasped. 'I've heard of those. But…why would you have that?'
'Well,' Emma pondered, 'I've asked mother that before, and I think it's the danger that's part of the appeal. My mother I think has a sort of understanding about those poisonous plants. She admires them, and says that as long as they are respected, they are harmless. Also, I think she just likes to collect them and care for them. Many are rare and difficult to find.'
'Interesting.'
'You like plants?'

‘Yes,’ Beatrice nodded eagerly. ‘I didn’t have an interest in that sort of thing before I met Vladislav but…he opened that world for me.’ Beatrice grinned widely. ‘Now I adore flowers, rare flowers…bees and butterflies and other critters that visit your garden.’
‘What about your family?’ Emma asked.
‘Vladislav is all I have.’
‘I see.’
‘More importantly’ Beatrice furrowed her brow, ‘I really wanted to ask about the fox.’
‘What do you want to know?’
‘Everything’ Beatrice replied. ‘The truth is, I know next to nothing.’
‘Well, now I wonder where to begin.’ She thought for a moment, silence stretching on. ‘I guess the fox in the centre of all of this. The premise is quite simple. Whoever catches the fox, wins the heart of the Prince.’
‘But…what’s so special about the fox?’
‘I don’t know’ Emma admitted.
‘Is it a domestic fox?’
‘No’ Emma shook her head. ‘As far as I understand, it’s just a regular wild fox. The only thing that stands out about it, is the key it carries around its neck. Even the key is a strange design. From what I’ve been able to glimpse of it, there is a wing… part of the design…but how would it fit into a lock I wonder?’
‘So, what does the key open?’
‘I don’t know’ Emma said again. ‘I suppose only the person who catches the fox and obtains the key, will have the privilege of finding out what this all means. Besides for the Prince, it is a secret to everyone else, though perhaps the dragon-lady knows. The rest of us can only speculate. Maybe it leads to a room full of jewels and gold… wealth can buy so much.’
‘Maybe it leads to a library’ Beatrice wondered aloud. ‘Or another world.’
‘Perhaps’ Emma pondered, speaking slowly in response to Beatrice’s suggestions.
‘Where *is* the Prince?’ Beatrice asked.
‘I don’t know’ Emma said with a frown. ‘I’ve never seen him. Maybe he is in other lands. Perhaps he will know instantly if and when someone manages to obtain the key. Maybe he has magic of his own. It’s not known either way. He was always overshadowed by his mother. Always kept in the dark.’
‘The queen.’ Beatrice whispered. ‘I’ve heard of her.’
Emma’s expression became dark then. ‘She was a cruel dictator. For decades people suffered horribly. Starved…I heard stories.’
Emma took a deep breath, closing her eyes as she continued.
‘Those who opposed her were the ones to suffer the most. Political stuff.’ She shook her head. ‘I don’t understand much of it. I was never really told much. My family…our city, we were safe because we had the recourses. We were valuable to the dictator. Brunhilde was her name, I think. We were lucky.’ She sighed heavily. ‘One of my older brothers would tell me horror stories. The awful things she would do to her enemies. He told me the capital, where she lived. There were people made into candles, banquets where…’
She broke off suddenly, grimacing, closing her eyes suddenly.
‘Anyway…’ Emma went on. ‘I believe that when the Prince takes control and accepts his title as king, now that his father is dead too, that he will do everything in his power to rule these lands with a kind heart. What little is known about him, it is at least known that he is a gentle soul. Nothing like the cruel person his mother was.’

‘What about his father?’ Beatrice asked. ‘I haven’t heard much about him.’
Emma groaned.
‘He was merely a shadow king’ she went on. ‘The queen was the one truly ruling. She always was. I believe she began to slowly poison her husband, right from the very beginning, soon after they first became married and she gained her title. Gradually over time, he became sicker and sicker, not only in body, but in mind too.’ She looked skywards. ‘He became an empty shell of a man, or so my brothers told me. Then one day he just died.’
Emma shrugged her shoulders.
‘So many horrors. I’m so glad I wasn’t told too much.’
‘I had no idea’ Beatrice mumbled. ‘I’ve lived so far away for so long. The village I grew up in was very secluded. We rarely had contact with outsiders.’
‘I’ve never known such a life. My home was always so busy, not only inside, but outside too. We lived in a busy city. I remember…’ Emma giggled shyly to herself. ‘There was this boy I liked. He was my neighbour… he still is but…well, I hope to see him again someday.’
Beatrice leaned forwards with increased interest then.
‘We’re really great friends. We’ve known each other from a very young age. He’s my best friend but…well…’ she giggled again, avoiding Beatrice’s gaze. ‘I’m just…’ another giggle. ‘I had my bedroom right beside his. I mean… um…’
Beatrice continued to listen silently, fascinated by her sudden change of demeanour.
‘His home is right next to mine. Our windows face each other’s. We would often climb into each other’s rooms. We each had a wooden board and… our parents had no idea. It was fun and exciting breaking the rules. We almost got caught more than once by a pestering maid. But that only made it all the more exciting …I remember… and the drop below was… oh it made my heart race…’
Emma seemed to be getting more and more flustered by the second, stumbling over her words. Beatrice decided to give her a way out.
‘How long have you been here?’
‘Oh. A few months’ Emma said. ‘I keep in regular contact with my family though. I always look forward to receiving their letters.’
‘That’s wonderful. How many other women are here?’
‘There used to be many’ Emma said. ‘But the numbers have dwindled over the months since the first announcement.’
‘I see.’
‘The fox really does seem impossible to catch’ Emma said with frustration in her voice, ‘but I am hoping to succeed with my magic, and with studying the fox’s behaviour…and with patience and understanding.’
‘Well, I hope you succeed.’
‘You’re not going to try to catch it yourself?’
‘Why would I?’ Beatrice said rising to her feet. ‘I have no interest in the Prince. I don’t want to change my life. I have everything I could ever want. More than I could ever have dreamed for.’
‘Oh, I see’ Emma raised an eyebrow knowingly. ‘So you love each other.’
‘We just came here to see the fox’ Beatrice went on, ignoring the statement. ‘Mostly it was his curiosity.’
She curtsied, dipping her head to Emma. It was then that Beatrice noticed something. There were mirrors on the ground surrounding them, some tilted, some laid flat.

Beatrice smiled.
*So that's how the natural sunlight reaches here,* she thought to herself.
Beatrice straightened again.
'It was lovely to meet you' Beatrice said. 'I don't know how long we're staying. Maybe we'll meet again. Thank you for talking with me.'
'Oh, um…no problem. It was nice talking to you.'
Beatrice nodded again, before turning on her heel and strolling away, continuing her exploration of the gardens.

## Chapter Thirty-Two
## Razzamatazz

She began to familiarize herself with this new place, and its meandering paths and tracks. The little rivers and waterfalls, some of which had miniature bridges and steps arched over. This whole place almost seemed like someone's life's work, someone who had a passion for architecture and wildlife, bringing them together in perfect balance.

After a time, Beatrice saw the chimera again. The creature had her back to her, and was tending to the plants. It appeared at a glance, that she was placing new seeds in the dirt. There was a basket beside her that had some pulled weeds inside, these were only tiny, the garden being well cared for, they were not given the chance to properly grow.
'What do you do with them when you are finished?' Beatrice asked.
Razzamatazz straightened up.
'The weeds?'
'Yes.'
'I have a tank of hungry caterpillars in my room' the creature replied. 'They will eat any living matter they are given, including each other if they get hungry enough.'
'Oh my. Why are they in a tank?'
'Because if they were not, they would spread like wildfire and destroy these lands by eating everything they could reach.'
'So they are like locusts?'
'I suppose.' Razzamatazz turned to face Beatrice fully now. 'Locusts were brought on by a plague caused by the Pharoh long ago, were they not?'
'Some of the stories differ' Beatrice replied. 'Where do these caterpillars come from?'
'I do not know. They've been here in captive longer than I have. I believe their species is extinct in the wild. It's best kept that way.'
'Hm' Beatrice pursed her lips in thought.
She decided to change the subject.
'I saw you petting the fox' Beatrice said. 'The one with the key around its next.'
'The fox is just a friend to me.'
'Then why don't you take the key for yourself?'

Razzamatazz gave a dismissive wave then, doing so immediately without pause.
‘I’ve no interest in such things’ she said.
‘What does the key open?’
‘That is for others to find out’ Razzamatazz said.
‘Do you know what it opens?’
‘Yes,’ Razzamatazz answered. ‘Of course I do.’
‘You say it like it’s obvious’ Beatrice noted.
‘Well,’ Razzamatazz said, ‘this is my home.’
She abruptly turned away then.
‘I should go now; I have chores to do.’
‘Chores?’
‘Yes. This garden takes a lot of work to maintain.’
‘You care for this garden by yourself?’
‘Yes,’ Razzamatazz nodded. ‘It takes up nearly every spare moment of my time. But I enjoy it greatly.’
She gave Beatrice a low and polite bow.
‘Good day to you. I wish you the best luck in catching the fox.’
And then she walked away, carrying her basket of weeds with her. Her posture was straight and her footsteps precise.
Beatrice couldn’t stop herself thinking how elegant she was. Almost otherworldly.
And then another thought crossed her mind.
‘She bowed’ Beatrice voiced aloud, ‘instead of curtseying. I wonder why…’

Beatrice returned to Vladislav a short time later.
‘Can you teach me how to make a sword?’
‘I’m sorry?’
Vladislav’s cup of tea was halfway to his mouth when he froze.
Beatrice laughed awkwardly. ‘Let me explain.’
She took the seat opposite him at the little round table.
‘I just realised’ she began slowly, ‘that it’s a skill I do not possess, and I want to change that.’
‘Well, well’ he chuckled, setting his cup down again. ‘That *would* be interesting. I don’t know how to do that myself.’
Beatrice gasped enthusiastically, unable to stop herself.
‘We can learn together’ she said eagerly, leaning forwards and placing her hand upon his.
‘That…would be lovely.’
She drew her hand back then, sitting up straighter.
‘I’m already so excited.’
‘Well hold on a moment now’ Vladislav hissed. ‘You’ve sprung this on me very suddenly. Just… give me time to process this. I feel thrown in the deep-end.’
‘I suppose you’ll have to consult your books’ Beatrice raised an eyebrow playfully.
‘Yes, well, now that I think about it, I don’t know if I actually have any books based on that subject.’

‘You don’t?’ Beatrice gasped again. ‘I’m surprised.’
‘So am I’ Vladislav realised. ‘I need to remedy that.’
‘Does that mean we’re visiting a bookstore soon?’
‘Perhaps.’
‘Hm.’ Beatrice frowned.
‘I’m sorry I made tea without you’ he said. ‘I wasn’t sure when you’d be back.’
‘That’s fine’ Beatrice said simply. ‘I don’t like cold tea anyway. No no’ she hastened, as Vladislav made to rise. ‘I’ll make us both a fresh tea.’
Vladislav descended back into his chair.
‘There’s flavoured tea in the cupboard.’
‘What flavour would you like?’ she asked.
‘Earl grey.’
‘Perfect. I’ll haaaave… mmmm…. Peppermint… no wait, I think I’ll have berry.’
Vladislav hissed in amusement at her indecisiveness.
They were silent as Beatrice brewed the tea, preparing two separate pots, bringing them over to the table with matching teacups and saucers.
Vladislav folded his hands upon his lap as he observed.
Beatrice poured the tea, smiling at him.
‘So’ Beatrice said, sitting back down. ‘I understand the premise of the fox now.’
‘As do I.’
Beatrice slumped her shoulders.
‘Are you pouting at me?’ Vladislav asked with great amusement in his tone. ‘I have rarely seen that expression from you.’
‘Well. I was hoping to tell you all about it.’
‘Go on then’ Vladislav said, tilting his head. ‘You still can.’
‘Alright.’ Beatrice took a breath before she began. ‘Whoever manages to capture the fox, and retrieve the key, will win the heart of the Prince’ she finished clearly.
‘Prince’ Vladislav nodded. ‘He is king now, or will be as soon the official ceremony has taken place.’
‘Official ceremony?’
‘When he finds his wife’ Vladislav explained, ‘and they are married.’
She nodded.
‘Yes…I see.’
She tilted her head playfully at him, echoing his gesture moments before.
‘So’ Beatrice went on. ‘Is your curiosity satisfied? That’s why we’ve come here after all, wasn’t it? To find out about this fox.’ She leaned forwards with her elbows on the table. ‘Is that not correct?’
‘You say it like you’re ready to go home.’
‘Are we not?’
‘No’ Vladislav shook his head. ‘Not at all. There is still so much to learn.’
‘Like what?’
Vladislav paused for a moment in thought.
‘The Prince’ he finished at last. ‘I want to know more about him. I want to meet him. I want to see how this story ends.’ He paused again, his mind seemingly beginning to wander. ‘I want to see who finally manages to capture that fox. I wonder who will be the cunning woman who outsmarts it…and becomes the new queen.’

Beatrice dipped her head, smiling and closing her eyes.
‘I guess returning home will have to wait’ she said to herself.
‘I will be returning of course’ Vladislav said. ‘To care for the animals.’
‘Of course,’ Beatrice said flattening her dress then. ‘I’m glad you have the magic to travel so far to care for them. Though it’s a shame I can never learn magic myself, I’m glad I can experience it a little through you.’

Story Intermission – Start

Brief overview of story so far:
Beatrice and Vladislav travelled far from home to see an unusual fox. This fox carries a key around its neck. Curious about it, Vladislav wanted to see it with his own eyes and find out more about it, Beatrice was more interested in the beautiful gardens in which it lived.

The premise of the fox is as follows; whoever can catch it will win the heart of the Prince (son of the cruel queen, who acted more like a dictator and tyrant than one who cared for her people. She is now dead.) The Prince himself is known to be a kind person with a tender heart, but an iron fist, under a velvet glove.
Whoever can win the heart of the Prince, will become his queen, rule the kingdom alongside him, and continue his legacy, and his reign of peace with many children, to prevent others fighting over the crown, therefore saving future lives.

Where the Prince himself is, it not known.
What the key opens (the one around the fox’s neck) is not known.

When Beatrice finally returns home, things will be very different, from when she first left.

Perhaps she will never return home. For nothing in life is certain.

Story Intermission – End

## Chapter Thirty-Three
## Blade-smithing: Creating your own blade from scratch for the Novice

Beatrice lay in the field, pausing from her book to look upwards.
She saw a falcon soaring through the sky, moving in a straight-line.
'That must be Emma's falcon' Beatrice smiled. 'Probably another letter from her family.'
A shadow fell over her then.
'Vladislav?' Beatrice sighed patiently. 'You know you're standing in my light.'
'I'm just wondering when you'll be finished with that book.'
'I've already finished' she grinned, leaning back against Spud's flank and gazing up at Vladislav's skeletal head. 'I'm just re-reading it. It's very interesting.'
Vladislav turned his head at an angle, so he was able to see her more clearly sitting below him.
'Then may I politely request it from you?' he asked.
Beatrice snapped the book shut, handing it up to him.
'Thank you kindly.'
Beatrice closed her eyes, feeling the warmth of the sun upon her skin. The cool touch of the breeze.
'This is perfect' Beatrice whispered. 'This is so perfect.'
'Did you say something?' Vladislav turned back to look at her. 'You're muttering.'
Beatrice rose to her feet, sighing heavily.
'I think I'm going to wander in the garden' she told him. 'I need to stretch my legs. My muscles have gotten a bit stiff' she chuckled. 'I think I've sat for a bit too long.'
'You've gotten really into this book haven't you.'
'Absolutely' she beamed. 'I'm really looking forward to trying it out for myself.'
'Yes,' Vladislav mused. 'We could build a new building' he said, 'just for forging.'
Beatrice placed her hands over her heart, dipping her head silently, trying to control the excitement welling inside her.
She lowered her arms, taking a deep breath.
'I suppose I'll see you back in the room.'
'Yes, of course.'
'Are you listening?'
Vladislav looked up from the book.
'Yes of course.'
Beatrice giggled, giving him a playful curtsey, before turning and skipping away.
Vladislav watched her go, beginning to chitter. His jaw trembling violently.

## Chapter Thirty-Four
## The Winged-Key

More time passed, and Vladislav still had not made the decision to leave.
'So, when *are* we leaving?' Beatrice asked.
'Tomorrow' Vladislav answered, speaking to the ground. 'Or perhaps the day after. Very very soon regardless. I was going to hang around for a little longer until the fox was captured… I am curious as to what the key it carries opens…but…' Vladislav rose to his feet, closing the lid on the jar he carried. 'I don't think he will be captured any time soon.'
'What makes you say that?' Beatrice asked curiously, kicking her legs playfully.
She sat on a low branch now, looking over Vladislav as he worked.
'I made myself concealed several times as I wandered through the garden' Vladislav grumbled, 'that fox is very wise. He must have escaped many attempts to try to capture him, and let's just say, I've not seen any woman come even close.'
'He?' Beatrice queried.
'Yes. The fox is male.'
'How can you tell? There's no physical different between the genders, is there? Were you able to get very close?'
'I saw him pee.'
Beatrice baulked.
'I was not able to get close' Vladislav clarified. 'I tried once, but his hearing is sharp. He heard me from a long way away, he knew exactly where I was, though he could not see me. He ran the opposite direction. I definitely spooked him.'
'I see' Beatrice mused. 'So, foxes and dogs are the same in that regard.
'That's right' Vladislav continued, studying the contents of the jar closely, holding it right up close to his eye sockets. 'Males stand, females squat.'
'Did you get your soil samples?' she asked him.
'Are you blushing?' he said then.
'What are you collecting the soil for anyway?' Beatrice asked, ignoring the question.
Vladislav sighed.
'I plan to study the soils from different spots around here. To see what exactly is in it…and what makes the plants here grow so well.'
'I see. So, you want to take some plants home.'
'Of course,' Vladislav said, slipping the jar of soil into his great cloak. 'But I want to study the soil first. It always makes me sad when I bring new flowers to my home, only for them to die. It feels like I murdered them. It feels like I kidnapped them from their home, and brough them to a place they could not survive. It feels unfair. Unjust…'
Vladislav turned towards her.
'Are you ready to go back to our room?'
'Not just yet' she said. 'I want to stay out here a bit longer first.'
'You're enjoying your books?'
'I am' Beatrice said, glancing towards the base of the trunk of the low tree in which she sat. There on the ground were a small stack of books. The top one about insects.
'What is your favourite type of insect you've seen so far?' Vladislav asked.

‘Definitely the praying mantis’ Beatrice replied without pause. ‘So beautiful and alluring. Pulchritudinous.’
‘You’ve used that word incorrectly’ he told her. ‘That word is used of…’
‘...a person only’ Beatrice interrupted. ‘I know’ she grinned slyly. ‘I just wanted to see if you knew the word.’
‘You were testing me?’ Vladislav asked incredulous.
‘There may come a time’ Beatrice said playfully, ‘where my knowledge overtakes yours.’ She paused. ‘I wanted to see if today was that day.’
Vladislav hissed in amusement, his eyes burning bright.
‘It’s incredible how they imitate different flowers’ Beatrice went on. ‘The praying mantis I mean.’
‘Did you know the females eat their own mates?’
‘I did.’
‘Did you know that doing so provides more nutrition for herself, and to feed her offspring?’
‘I did’ Beatrice said again.
Vladislav reached down to take the book on top of the little stack.
‘Here’ he said, handing it to her. ‘If you aren’t ready to come inside yet, see what new insects you can find.’
‘What are *you* going to do?’
‘I think I’ll go back inside and look through some cook books. Are you in the mood for anything in particular?’
‘Mh-hm’ Beatrice shook her head. ‘Anything you make is tasty.’
‘That’s not true. There was that one time…’
Beatrice silenced him with a gentle touch.
‘Shh’ she smiled warmly to him. ‘Just go inside and read. I will stay out here and look at bugs.’
Vladislav went away then, and Beatrice slid off the branch, holding the book close to her chest. She began to wander.

*Sometime later*

‘There you are’ Beatrice grinned. ‘You’re finally still long-enough for me to get a good look at you.’
She raised the open book closer to her face, doing so slowly, so as not to startle the little creature.
‘The hummingbird hawk-moth…feeds with its long proboscis…its wings move so quickly that it *hums*…. how curious…’
She paused her reading for a moment, glancing towards this bizarre creature again, before her eyes flitted back to the pages of her book.
‘Common in gardens… it feeds on the nectar of honeysuckle, red valerian and other flowers…hmm…’ she paused again, glancing towards it, before continuing. ‘The hummingbird hawk-moth has a rounded greyish-body, greyish-brown forewings…. bright orange hindwings…and a broad black and white tail… it has a visible curled tongue and antenna, much like the butterfly…’
She glanced up then.

‘Oh…you’ve gone…’
Her eyes roved around the bush, before she allowed herself to straighten up, closing the book gently.
‘You’ve managed to escape while I was distracted’ she said. ‘No matter…’
Beatrice placed the book in a little satchel she carried, something she had made herself with simple fabric in her time staying here. ‘I’ll see if I can find an orchid mantis.’
Beatrice continued to wander, passing through a grassy area. She paused, noticing something amusing that caused her to giggle behind her hand.
There was the fox, the one with the key on a silver chain around its neck. It was sitting on top of a live trap, eating the food it had stolen from inside it, which was a piece of fish it seemed.
Beatrice took a step closer, chuckling loudly to herself now, seeing the fox had placed a heavy rock in the doorway of the trap, preventing it from closing.
The fox was sitting on the trap triumphantly, eating the fish slowly, as if savouring its victory, smugly.
‘Or maybe I’m applying anthropomorphism to it’ Beatrice wondered to herself aloud.
‘Do you often talk to yourself?’
Beatrice gave a slight start, glancing around the see the dragon-lady there.
She approached Beatrice, coming to stand by her side. Together they both watched the fox.
‘Still, no one has ever caught him.’ Razzamatazz sounded forlorn as she said this.
‘Has any woman ever gotten close?’ Beatrice asked.
‘One woman I remember’ Razzamatazz said, her eyes becoming distant. ‘She…caught his tail in a trap. The woman tried to grab him with her hands, and take the key by force. But he became vicious, defensive. She was unable to get close enough to obtain the key, not by the time he managed to chew through the rope and flee.’
‘Have you ever set him free from any trap?’
‘Only one time. I am not to interfere with anyone’s attempts to obtain his key. But one woman…I was so angry… she caught him in a snare. That was the only time I stepped in.’
‘Why were you angry?’
‘Because of the cruelty’ she said. ‘The way he cried in pain. The snare was tight, it nearly cut him in half. He could barely breath. That woman was desperate for the key. It seemed she would do anything to get it,’ she finished in a quiet voice. ‘I would not let her have it.’
‘What happened to her’ Beatrice asked tentatively.
‘I killed her.’
‘What?’
‘I cut her in half’ the chimera clarified. ‘Like she would have done to him.’
‘S-so you are like his protector.’
‘You do not need to be afraid of me.’
‘I’m sorry.’
‘Hmm’ Razzamatazz frowned. ‘I’m not so much his protector. We are more… like friends.’ She paused. ‘He trusts me.’ She tilted her head towards Beatrice then, eyeing her closely. ‘I want *you* to trust me.’
‘What for? I’ll be leaving soon.’
‘Does that matter?’ Razzamatazz countered. ‘I fear I may have just given a poor image of myself earlier when I mentioned…taking a life.’ She paused. ‘I hope you are not afraid of me.’

‘Um. No, I….’ Beatrice spoke slowly as her mind gradually processed, ‘I don’t think I am. And besides’ Beatrice took on a grin then, a smug expression, much like the fox had been wearing. ‘Vladislav would protect me.’
‘But he is not here.’
‘Then he would take revenge for my passing. Or if anything else bad happened to me.’
‘You think he would do that?’ Razzamatazz asked.
‘I am certain of it.’
‘You must know him very well.’
‘I would like to think so. He cares about me, and I care about him too. If anything were to happen to him…’ she broke off then.
‘Would you avenge him?’ Razzamatazz asked with curiosity.
‘I don’t know, I might, or…I might just forgive.’
‘You would *forgive* someone who would harm a loved one?’
‘Hate… leads to more hate.’
‘But wouldn’t you want to crush your enemies?’ Razzamatazz said. ‘Feel the satisfaction of them cowering before you?’
Beatrice shook her head without pause.
‘No.’ she said. ‘I’m not like that.’
‘But…the power you feel…’
‘There is a different sort of strength found in love’ Beatrice smiled. ‘Forgiveness does not make you weak.’
Razzamatazz stared at Beatrice, unsure of what else to say.
But she was not the only one who had been watching Beatrice closely as she spoke.
The fox’s attention was fixated on her also, and he stared at Beatrice with a piercing gaze.
He leapt down from the trap on which he had been sitting, padding slowly towards Beatrice, eyes fixated on her.
Beatrice finally noticed, turning her head towards him.
She smiled at him.
‘Hey there buddy. Did you enjoy your fish? You’re very handsome.’
The fox continued to get closer, stopping just over an arm’s distance away from her, and sitting.
‘What’s wrong?’ Beatrice asked, seeing the fox continue to stare at her closely, his attention never breaking. ‘Are you confused about my face?’ Beatrice touched her own cheek. ‘I have vitiligo. It’s a skin condition that causes patches of skin to lose colour, because of a lack of melanin…that’s a pigment in the skin.’
The fox tilted his head.
‘Oh my’ Beatrice chuckled. ‘It almost seems as if he understands.’
‘You are very knowledgeable’ Razzamatazz noted, not paying attention to the fox.
‘Oh, do you think so?’ Beatrice said, turning back to the chimera. ‘It’s not so odd that I know a lot about my own condition. I do also read a lot.’
Beatrice felt something touch her. She glanced down, seeing the fox sniffing her finger.
‘Oh my goodness’ Razzamatazz exclaimed. ‘He’s…never done that before.’
‘You mean…’ Beatrice said, continuing to stare down at the fox, ‘sniff someone?’
‘I mean get this close, to anyone other than myself.’
‘Well,’ Beatrice said, making a conscious effort not to make any sudden movements, so as not to alarm him, or scare him off. ‘Maybe it’s because I’m not trying to catch him.’
The two women fell silent, eyes cast towards the ground.

‘What’s your name buddy?’
‘He doesn’t have one’ Razzamatazz said.
‘Oh.’
The fox sat then, much like a domestic dog would, his face pointed directly skywards, eyes connected to Beatrice’s, unblinking. He sat so close; his front legs and throat touched Beatrice. Beatrice had only ever seen this sort of behaviour in a collie-dog, waiting for a ball to be thrown.
‘What do you want buddy?’ Beatrice asked, of course to no response.
The fox remained silent, and in the same position as before.
Razzamatazz seemed to hesitate.
‘Why don’t you…’ Razzamatazz began, ‘try to take the key from him?’
Beatrice considered this.
‘Hmmm…I mean… I could, but… I feel like I should speak to Vladislav first.’
Without warning, the fox bolted away, causing her a start.
‘Oh gosh’ Beatrice said, hand going to her chest. ‘He frightened me.’
Razzamatazz ignored this, speaking to Beatrice again.
‘Would you like to wander the garden with me?’
‘I would love that.’

A few hours passed, and Beatrice and Razzamatazz remained together.
Beatrice found she enjoyed her company greatly, and even began to help her tend to the garden, talking about their own back home.
Beatrice saw a tender side of the chimera, one who seemed to hold a greater love for the insects within the garden, more than the plants themselves.
‘The butterflies seem to like you’ Beatrice said, seeing yet another one land on the back of her hand.
Razzamatazz stopped what she was doing, digging in the dirt, and carefully lifted her hand, where there sat and beautiful butterfly.
‘This happens a lot throughout the day’ Razzamatazz explained. ‘They like my salty skin.’
‘Your skin is salty?’
‘Yes.’ Razzamatazz raised her hand a little more, allowing Beatrice to observe, the butterfly’s tongue pressing lightly against her flesh. ‘Moreso than humans. An alchemist once told me that my body is made up of mostly salt, more salt than water…so different from humans.’
‘An alchemist?’
Razzamatazz flicked her hand sharply then, causing the butterfly to leap into the air, flittering away in a scattered-path.
‘Please don’t ask me any questions about that’ Razzamatazz said quickly.
‘I won’t.’ Beatrice glanced askance, seeing movement in her peripheral vision. ‘Oh, he’s back.’
‘The fox?’
‘Yes.’
Razzamatazz continued to garden, ignoring the butterfly returning, coming to land on her shoulder this time, and feeding from her. There was a second one in the centre of her back, another several on her tail.
‘He never does go too far’ the dragon said.
‘I guess he’s happy here,’ Beatrice said, ‘despite being constantly pursued.’

She watched the fox, who sat now a distance away, staring at her seemingly transfixed, as he had been doing before.
*He must feel safe living here* Beatrice thought to herself. *And confident*.
'How long have people been trying to catch him?' Beatrice asked.
'Oh' Razzamatazz thought, 'how long *has* it been?' she wondered aloud to herself, stopping what she was doing and sitting back on her thighs. 'Several months, maybe around two years I think.'
'That's about how long I've been living with Vladislav.'
'Who is he to you?' Razzamatazz asked. 'Do you have any romantic feelings towards him? Or is it just platonic?'
'Well,' Beatrice mused, as another woman crept behind her, edging closer towards the fox, who watched her closely. 'I don't know really. I didn't in the beginning. Such a thought never occurred to me…but since we danced in the hall…'
She broke off.
'You danced together?'
'We stayed with a friend of Vladislav's' Beatrice explained. 'His name is Asabourougha. He was very kind and hospitable. One evening, the last we stayed at his home, Vladislav and I danced together.' Beatrice paused. 'Since then, I've felt different. Though I don't know how *he* feels.'
'Why don't you ask?'
'I could never' Beatrice shook her head. 'Whatever may happen between us, I would like it to happen naturally. I don't want to force anything to change. I don't want to potentially damage anything good we have.'
Razzamatazz nodded silently at that. Beatrice got the impression that she truly understood, despite saying very little.
Beatrice looked around then, noticing the fox was gone now, as was the woman who had been not so subtly stalking him.
'It is very amusing' Razzamatazz said. 'How these women continue to chase the fox so hopelessly.' She turned to face Beatrice then. 'Why do you not chase the fox yourself?'
'I have no interest in such things' Beatrice said, 'the same as you I suppose.'
'But don't you want to win the heart of the Prince?' Razzamatazz asked.
'Why would I?' Beatrice countered. 'I have no idea who this person is. Why would I want to win his heart?'
'But he is a Prince' Razzamatazz countered. 'Don't you want to be a princess? His queen?'
'No. Why would I want that? I am happy with my life now as it is.'
'Because of Vladislav?'
'Yes.'
'But think of the power and status' Razzamatazz persisted.
Beatrice just shook her head.
'You just want Vladislav?'
'And you just want your garden' Beatrice added.
The two women smiled.
Leaning back over the flowerbed, together they continued to pull the weeds, until they were interrupted once more.
'Vladislav, what a pleasant surprise.'
'There you are Beatrice. You've been gone a while; I was starting to worry.'

‘I’m sorry’ Beatrice gasped, rising swiftly, and brushing the dirt from her dress. ‘I…got carried away.’
‘It’s alright’ Vladislav said. ‘I just wanted to bring you back.’
Beatrice gave a nod to the chimera.
‘Thank you for letting me help you, I appreciate your time.’
‘It’s been a pleasure’ Razzamatazz dipped her head in return. ‘I will miss you when you go.’
‘We are going now’ Vladislav said to Beatrice. ‘Unless you would like one last time to see this garden.’
‘No’ Beatice smiled, practically skipping towards him. ‘I am ready to go home.’

They walked side by side along the path, heading back to their room to collect the last of their things together.

And that was when Beatrice paused, noticing something moving in the corner of her vision.
Vladislav continued to walk ahead, leaving her to linger, having not noticed what distracted her.
As Beatrice watched, she saw the little fox again, appearing from the brush. It came up to her once more, sitting this time, directly in her path. Between she and Vladislav.
‘It’s you again’ Beatrice spoke quietly, her voice barely a whisper. ‘What do you want?’
The fox approached her, this time holding the key in its mouth.
He stopped before her, staring into her eyes intently.
It was almost as if the fox was offering it to her.
‘*Almost*…’ Beatrice breathed.

## Chapter Thirty-Five
## What was behind the Door

Curiosity overcame her, and Beatrice had fallen into the fox’s deep eyes.
Deeming the fox friendly-enough, she reached down and touched the key.
The fox moved slowly backwards, allowing the silver chain to fall over its neck until it was completely off him, now dangling in the air. The key in Beatrice’s hand.

Beatrice straightened up, examining the key closely.

It was an elaborate silver piece, and heavy in her hand, bearing several blue jewels upon it. Along the body of the key, was attached a silver wing.
She looked up, seeing the fox walking slowly back, until he stopped.
And then he began to transform, glowing in a light so bright, that Beatrice had to shield her gaze.
When the light faded, she looked again, and saw the fox was gone. In its place, stood a man.
He was a handsome young man, with fair skin, pale eyes, and light-blonde hair. He wore a white shirt, atop which was a light-blue coat, with gold patterns, silver studs, and little gold chains at the shoulders. His arms were not through the sleeves. Instead, the coat sat neatly upon his shoulders. He wore black trousers, and at his neck, was a black bow-tie.
'*Beatrice*…' he took a step towards her. 'I finally get to speak to you.'
'Who…who are you?'
'It's me' he said, placing his hands upon his chest. 'It's the fox. I'm the Prince.'
'The Prince?'
'Yes,' he urged, taking another step towards her. 'Oh Beatrice, *my* Beatrice…'
He reached out to her, taking her hand in both his own.
It was then she realised, that the two of them were in some sort of bubble, completely concealed from the rest of the world.
Beatrice tried to look over his shoulder, but could see nothing.
'Vlad…?'
Beatrice felt herself being transported by an unfamiliar magic, taking her to another place.
The Prince let go of her, and Beatrice stumbled back, realising she was standing on a different type of ground.
It was soil, dirt, and grass. When before she had been walking on a stone path, now she was standing in an area that was a little overgrown, an area that had been allowed to become a little more wild.
'Where...?' Beatrice uttered, looking about her.
It took her a little longer to realise where she was. She had wandered these gardens for many hours in the time she had been here, though it took her longer for her to re-orient herself after being enveloped by the new magic.
'We're by the tower' she mumbled after a few seconds had passed, her brain still feeling a little foggy. 'My room is…*our* room…is just over *there*.'
'Yes,' the Prince smiled. 'This is the tower you can see from your room. This is *the* tower. Fox-call Tower.'
'Fox-call Tower?'
The Prince lifted his hand with a smile. Beatrice saw in his palm he held the key. She did not realise that it had been taken from her.
She then noticed a wooden door beside them.
It was so innocuous; she hadn't even known it was there, until just now.
'*This…* is what the key unlocks?' Beatrice voiced with surprise.
'I'm sure you were expecting something a little more grand, perhaps something more hidden. But don't you see, this is perfect, its…'
'…hidden in plain sight' Beatrice finished.
The Prince's eyes gleamed, and his smile widened in excitement.
'Yes,' he said triumphantly. 'You understand. It looks like nothing important at all, perhaps just a tool shed…but…'

He moved the key towards the lock, though instead of putting it inside the keyhole, he simply held it near it. The metallic-wing part of the key began to glow white, before vanishing, leaving the rest of the key intact.
The lock clicked, and the door swung inwards.
'This is not just a key' the Prince said. 'It's the key to my heart.'
Beatrice blinked in confusion, not fully understanding.
'Come with me' the Prince offered, extending his hand for her to take.
Not knowing what else to do, Beatrice took it, and together they entered through the door.

Inside was an empty room, with nothing but a single set of stairs that circled upwards.
The pair walked slowly. The door was left open. The only light that entered the space, besides from through the open door, was from the random slits in the stone that were scattered about. Too narrow to see clearly through, their only purpose was to let the light in.
The pair continued to ascend upwards.
Eventually they came to a little balcony. The single path they followed, came to an end, where there was a single door.
'What is behind that door?' Beatrice asked.
'Open it and find out.'
And so, Beatrice stepped forwards, moving away from the Prince's side, letting go of him.
She approached the door, pausing to glance behind her, hesitating.
He remained standing there, smiling in encouragement.
She faced ahead again, then reached out towards the door, and pushed it gently open.
The door swung away from her, and Beatrice saw the room within.
It was a small empty room. The only thing inside was a full-length mirror on one side, and in the middle, was a mannequin.
Beatrice stepped into the room to get a better look at it.
'A dress' she said.
'A wedding dress' the Prince clarified, stepping into the room behind her.
He moved around her, coming to stand beside the mannequin.
It was white, with ¾ length sleeve, and a wide V-neck, with off-the-shoulder lace.
The main part of the dress was made from taffeta. A versatile fabric, that was stiffer than silk, and able to give a dress more structure. The material had a more matter appearance than that of satin. It was lightweight, and smooth.
There was also a great train (a part of the dress that trails behind you) pooled around the base of the mannequin. And a veil, that stretched even further.
Beatrice was stunned into silence. Her mind had gone completely blank.
Moving closer to the mannequin, she saw there were little diamonds, sewn into the dress itself.
The room itself was clean, with not a speck of dust to be found. Though Beatrice did not know it, this room, which was almost empty, was cleaned daily, as were the stairs, of course by the chimera.
Beatrice continued to stare wordlessly at the dress, her mouth agape.
'I love you Beatrice' the Prince said. 'I'm *in love* with you.'
'What?' was all that Beatrice was able to utter.
This was the first time in her life, where she was truly unable to think, completely unable to process the situation.

The Prince approached Beatrice again, reaching out to her and taking her hand once more.
He led her over towards the mirror, where Beatrice saw a vision.
This was clearly a mirror of magic. When it first reflected, the Prince and Beatrice were standing there before it, though within seconds, the image quickly changed.
Beatrice blinked, leaning forwards.
'I remember that' Beatrice said. 'I remember…'
'Yes,' the Prince smiled, 'it is a memory.'
Beatrice watched. She saw this interaction take place once more, only this time, it was from the fox's perspective, from the Prince's perspective:

*'I hope you are not afraid of me' the chimera said.*
*'Um. No, I….' Beatrice spoke slowly, 'I don't think I am. And besides' Beatrice grinned. 'Vladislav would protect me.'*
*'But he is not here.'*
*'Then he will take revenge for my passing. Or if anything else bad happened to me.'*
*'You think he would do that?' Razzamatazz asked.*
*'I am certain of it.'*
*'You must know him very well.'*
*'I would like to think so. He cares about me, and I care about him too. If anything were to happen to him…' she broke off then.*
*'Would you avenge him?' Razzamatazz asked.*
*'I don't know, I might, or…I might just forgive.'*
*'You would forgive someone who would harm a loved one?'*
*'Hate… leads to more hate.'*
*'But wouldn't you want to crush your enemies? Feel the satisfaction of them cowering before you?'*
*Beatrice shook her head without pause.*
*'No.' she said. 'I'm not like that.'*
*'But…the power you feel…'*
*'There is a different sort of strength found in love' Beatrice smiled. 'Forgiveness does not make you weak.'*

'That was the moment' the Prince began, as the vision faded. 'That was the moment I fell in love with you. All these *women*…' his face took on an expression of disgust. 'They pursued me because they were *selfish*. Their hearts were ugly. I was losing hope…for the *longest time*.' His voice broke. 'I thought I would never find what I was looking for, but then you came along, you, so beautiful and different…I've never seen anyone like you before.'
'But what about Razzamatazz?' Beatrice asked. 'She is loyal to you, and she has been here for so long. And she is so beautiful and healthy and smart. Surely every man would fall for her.'
'No.'
'Is it because she's not human?'
'No' the Prince said again. 'It's because I hate her.'
Beatrice hesitated.

*'…wouldn't you want to crush your enemies? Feel the satisfaction of them cowering before you?'*

‘I could *never* be with someone like *that’* the Prince said angrily, turning away from Beatrice, hiding his expression. ‘She has cruelty in her heart. I want to be with someone who is kind. Someone like *you’* he said, turning back towards her. ‘Oh…Beatrice.’
He approached her again, this time closing the gap.
Beatrice’s heart leapt in her chest as he wrapped his arms around her, holding her close, his face buried in her shoulder.
‘Beatrice. I want to you be my wife. My queen. I want to build a life with you, grow old with you. I want to have children with you, and teach them how to rule this kingdom once we are gone, with love and kindness. Like how my father used to be.’
Beatrice stared up at the ceiling awe-struck.
‘I love you Beatrice’ he said. ‘I love you…….. Do you love me?’
Beatrice smiled. But it was a sad smile.
‘You will make a wonderful king’ she said.
He released her then, leaning back and looking into her face.
‘I can see you are very kind’ she said to him, ‘and you will make a wonderful life with someone. But that someone is not me.’
She pushed away from him gently, taking a step back.
‘I’m sorry’ Beatrice said, ‘but I cannot give you what you are looking for.’
The Prince became upset, tears welling in his eyes, and then he became angry, walking away and pounding a fist against the wall.
‘*Dammit*!’ he cried. ‘I don’t understand. I planned all this…it was supposed to be perfect…’
‘I’m sorry’ Beatrice said again. ‘I cannot be with you. I will never fall in love with you, because I love someone else.’
The Prince grimaced, as if the words caused him physical pain.
‘*I hate him*’ the Prince snarled. ‘*I hate him…*’
Beatrice said nothing, but continue to watch him calmly.
The Prince shrugged his shoulders, lifting his arms in defeat.
‘*What do I do now?*’
‘Take me back’ Beatrice ordered firmly. ‘I want to be with Vladislav.’
The Prince turned towards Beatrice, tears in his eyes.
Beatrice stared back at him, her expression stoic.
The Prince let out a sigh, hanging his head.
He raised his hand, and Beatrice felt the magic rising around her once again.

## Chapter Thirty-Six
## Confession

Beatrice felt her feet touch the ground once more, letting out a sigh of relief.
She had been returned to the exact spot she had been standing previously, before the Prince had used his magic to take her away.

An instant later, she felt herself changing position again. She blinked, and was standing in a slightly different place than she had been a second ago.
Beatrice blinked in confusion, glancing around with eyes wide.
She realised she was in the same area, but seemed to have swapped places with Vladislav.
She felt a strange tingle coursing through her body, recognising the sensation of magic, Vladislav's magic.
She realised Vladislav had moved her, traded places with her, in order to get closer to the man faster.
He towered over the Prince, robes buffeting violently by a strong wind that erupted from him.
*'WHAT DID YOU DO!?'*
Vladislav's voice was screeching, like that of a screaming elk.
For a moment Beatrice felt fear, not for herself, but for the Prince.
But he seemed not fazed in the slightest.
The Prince swept his hair back from his face, straightening his shoulders and smirking boldly towards the mage.
'I did nothing at all' the Prince answered calmly. 'You can ask her yourself.'
This seemed to make Vladislav even angrier, and a darkness grew from him, seeping out from beneath his cloak, enveloping both himself and the Prince.
*'I could kill you if I wish…'*
'You will do no such thing!' Beatrice cried, running to him.
She came between them, glaring at Vladislav furiously.
'He was just trying to express himself!' Beatrice hollered right at Vladislav. 'He didn't mean any harm by it!'
*'How can you be so sure?'*
'I can feel it in my heart!'
*'Did he put his hands on you?'*
'No!'
Vladislav remained frozen for a few moments, before opening his great mouth, letting out a slow breath, steam emitting slowly from his dark throat.
He straightened slowly, regaining his original posture.
The wind subsided fast, and the dark dissipated slowly.
Vladislav began to chitter, his jaw trembling violently.
'There's that noise again' Beatrice sighed with relief. 'What does it mean?'
'I told you' Vladislav said, his voice returned to normal. 'It's because I love you. Only this time… it's a little different…'
Beatrice stepped back, so that she could get a better look at him, hand going to her chest.
'I realise now…' Vladislav said. 'I realise. My fear… the thought of you being in danger…'
He paused again, gathering his thoughts.
'I was scared' he said. 'I was *so* scared. I realise now, that it's because I love you. I'm *in* love with you.'
He paused again, this time with great trepidation.
'I hope you feel the same' he said.
Beatrice's eyes grew large and began to shimmer.
'I do' she uttered. 'I do…
…I love you… Vladislav. I love you.'

## Chapter Thirty-Seven
## The Burned-Girl

After that, Beatrice and Vladislav went away to a quiet part of the garden to be alone together. Here they sat. They spoke very little, instead they just held each other, Beatrice almost disappearing in Vladislav's vast robes.
They were interrupted when the Prince came to find them.
'You're still here' he said to them, his voice flat.
'I wanted to speak to you before we left' Beatrice said quickly, sitting up and turning towards the Prince.
'Why?'
'I imagine you will continue looking for a wife?' Beatrice pressed.
'Of course.'
The Prince still spoke in a monotone.
'On the way here' Beatrice continued, 'Vladislav and I came close to the village in which I grew up. I could not go back there, because of bad memories, but there is one thing I miss from my past. And that is a dear friend of mine. The only person I trusted at that time.' Beatrice paused, considering her next words. 'You said you were looking for a good person. Someone with a good heart and true kindness to marry. You will find that in my friend.'
'How can you be sure?' the Prince asked.
'I know' Beatrice nodded. 'She suffered like I did. Her father was cruel to her, but despite her hardships, she remained kind and patient, never losing hope for a better future. She was even kind to me, when no one else was.'
The Prince listened to Beatrice silently, absorbing her words.
'She is the only thing I miss from my past' Beatrice said. 'And I feel sure that if you were to approach her with kindness, and offer her an opportunity for a better life…then she would surely take it.'
'Where can I find her?' the Prince asked.
Beatrice told the Prince.
'Her family are very poor' Beatrice went on. 'I am certain that she still lives at home. I doubt she had been married off…because…' Beatrice fell silent.
'Because why?' the Prince asked flatly.
'Many consider her to be ugly' Beatrice replied, 'like they did with me.'
'Why?' he asked again.
Vladislav continued to sit beside Beatrice with his head bowed, listening in complete silence, remaining frozen like a statue.

‘Her face and body are badly burned’ Beatrice explained. ‘There was a fire one day, and... she ran in to save the animals, even went back for the chickens, when no one else would. They were our livelihood after all.’
‘She…’ the Prince began hesitantly, ‘sounds very brave.’
‘Yes. She had a lot more courage than I did when we were friends.’
‘I see.’
‘Another thing I should mention’ Beatrice added hastily. ‘She’s not a virgin. Perhaps it’s not my place to say but… I do not want to mislead you, and I want to be honest…it was not spoken of but… everyone knew.’
‘What do you mean?’ the Prince asked. ‘Is she married? Does she have a lover?’
‘No.’ Beatrice’s voice was sullen as she spoke now. ‘Her father…put his hands on her from a young age. He… likely still does. He uses his daughter as a servant and… his personal slave. He cannot marry her off because of her scars. And no one wants her because she is *unpure*.’ Beatrice sneered at the thought then, shaking her head.
The Prince pondered for a moment.
‘Has…’ he began, ‘she ever become pregnant?’
‘Yes,’ Beatrice answered. ‘She has already born several children, and her father has killed every single one.’
‘And people do nothing?’ the Prince asked incredulous. ‘They *allow* this?’
‘You have to remember’ Beatrice went on, ‘people have their own problems, for a start, and… its often easier to turn a blind eye.’ She fell silent for a time, thinking about her next words before continuing. ‘Why would someone take on someone else’s problems when they have so many of their own? The village I grew up in was very poor. I doubt anything has changed. Most people work hard just to get by from day to day.’
‘Would you take me to this village?’ the Prince asked.
Vladislav shifted, turning his head ever-so slightly to the side.
‘No’ Beatrice shook her head. ‘I’m sorry. But I can never go there again. I won’t.’
‘Do you not miss your friend?’
‘Of course I do.’
‘Would you like to see her again?’ the Prince asked.
‘Of course. But I can never go back.’
‘Then I shall bring her here’ the Prince said. ‘You will see her again.’
Beatrice gasped, sitting straighter, eyes growing wide.
‘You would do that? *Can* you do that?’
‘I possess magic’ the Prince said, placing a hand upon his chest. ‘There is a lot I can do. *You* there’ he added. ‘Vladislav, was it?’
‘Yes?’
‘I am leaving to travel to this village. Do I have your word that you will be here still when I return?’
Vladislav hesitated, tilting his head towards Beatrice, who stared at him intently now.
‘I would love to see my friend again’ Beatrice whispered.
Vladislav let out a resigned sigh.
It was clear he wanted to leave this place. It was clear he wanted to get away from the Prince. But for Beatrice, he would stay, just a little bit longer.
‘Alright’ he said reluctantly. ‘We can stay until you’re ready to go.’
Beatrice threw herself into his chest then, holding onto his robes tightly.

‘Thank you’ she breathed. ‘Thank you so much…’
Vladislav was caught a little off-guard by this at first, but moments later relaxed, holding her gently in return.
‘One last question.’
Beatrice let go of Vladislav, turning back to face the Prince.
‘What is your friend’s name?’
‘Her name is Dirt’ Beatrice said, ‘and she is the same age as me.’
‘*What* is her name?’ the prince asked curiously, tilting his head and frowning, certain he had not heard properly.
‘Dirt’ Beatrice reiterated. ‘Dirt is her name. There is a story behind it, but it’s not my place to tell.’
The Prince hesitated, seemingly a little confused at this, perhaps a bit concerned.
‘Well, what are you waiting for?’ Vladislav spoke up, addressing the Prince with a short tone. ‘Go and find her.’
‘And bring her back’ Beatrice finished eagerly.
The Prince looked at them, glancing first at one, then the other. And then he smiled.
With a low bow and an embellished flourishing movement of his hand, he vanished before their very eyes, his form breaking up into many little fragments of light, before drifting away and fading.

Someplace far away, a woman dressed in rags, with greasy hair and dirty hands, was going about her business. And then something surprised her, giving her a start.
She drew back in surprise, dropping the tools she had been carrying.
The Prince bowed to her, offering himself to her.
‘Why would you want someone like me?’ Dirt asked with shock. ‘You could have any woman you want in the entire kingdom. Someone beautiful, with status and money… This can’t be real.’
‘I assure you’ the Prince stepped forward, and pressing a hand to his heart. ‘This is real. I am the true Prince, and once we marry, I will be king, and you will be my queen.’
‘W-what?’
‘Please…’ the Prince said to her, stepping forwards again, finally closing the distance between them, grasping her hands in both his own. ‘Become my wife. Bear my children. Build a life with me.’
‘I don’t understand’ she shook her head.
‘I know this is a lot to process, and I'm sorry to spring this on you so suddenly, but I must return to the capital. I’ve been gone for far too long.’ He let her go, taking a step back then and falling to a knee.
‘Please’ he said, presenting her with a ring. ‘Will you marry me?’
She gasped, staring down at him in shock.
The ring was elaborate, deep gold in colour, and bearing two grand gems. One a shining teal-colour, the other a vivid pink, both side by side.
A prince, *the* Prince, soon to be king of the kingdom, kneeling before a lowly peasant girl.
‘Such a thing unheard of’ she managed to utter.

‘I won’t force you’ the Prince said. ‘You can stay here and continue living the life you have been, or you can accept my offer, and change your life forever. For the better.’
She hesitated, glancing slowly behind her, before facing ahead again.
She was crying now.
‘I accept’ she croaked, beginning to tremble.
‘I am happy’ the Prince breathed, rising to his feet, and taking her hand once more, slipping the ring onto her wedding finger. ‘We will leave now. Is there anyone you want to say goodbye to before we go?’
‘No’ she said without hesitation.
‘Anything you wish to bring with you?’
‘No.’
‘Do you wish to ever return here?’
‘No.’
‘Then it is decided’ the Prince continued. ‘Your new name will be Diana. It means divine and heavenly.’ He smiled at her, gazing into her eyes. ‘Today is the first day we spend the rest of our lives together.’
He raised his cloak then in a sudden movement, enveloping them both in magic, and disappearing in the blink of an eye.

In the days that followed, people tried to look for her, but quickly gave up. Concluding that, she had finally decided to run away, and having either succeeded and escaped, or succumb to the elements or to the wildlife and died.
Her name was rarely spoken of in the months that followed, and years later, was forgotten entirely.
In time, no one even knew she had existed in that village at all, and life there continued on much as it had done before.

## Chapter Thirty-Eight
## Reunion

Diana’s feet touched the ground. She had been transported by magic, away from her home, and had come now to a new place.
The first thing she did, was double-over and throw up.
‘Ah’ the Prince chuckled awkwardly. ‘I’m sorry, I should have warned you. Magic can be a strain on the body for those who are not used to it.
Diana straightened up, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand and grimacing.
And then her expression changed.
‘Where are we….? Did you say *magic*?’
She straightened up further, standing fully tall now.
‘Where are we?’ she said again.
‘This is my home’ the Prince said.
Diana looked around her, utterly perplexed.

‘This is…*r-real’* she said, voice trembling.
‘Yes. Everything I have told you is true. My proposition, my title… and I promise to love and care for you, until the end of our days.’
Diana let out a sob then, tears welling up in her eyes as she began to tremble all over her body.
‘Are you alright? Are you sick? What is wrong?’
Diana flicked her hair back from her face, looking back at the Prince, and despite tears rolling down her face, she was smiling.
‘Nothing is wrong’ she said to him. ‘I am happy, because I don’t ever have to go back home.’
The Prince let out a deep sigh of relief, hand going to his chest.
‘Don’t worry’ he said. ‘I promise you, that as long as it’s in my power, I will do everything I can to make your life a happy one. I promise you; no one will ever hurt you again.’
Diana listened to these words closely, staring deep into the Prince’s eyes.
‘You *are* serious,’ she said. ‘You want to marry *me*?’
‘Yes,’ the Prince nodded sincerely. ‘And I suppose you’re wondering how I found you.’
‘You were looking for me specifically?’
The Prince nodded, his smile was gentle and kind.
‘It was because of one person’ he explained. ‘A black and white girl.’
‘Black and white….?’ Diana frowned.
‘In fact,’ the Prince said, looking over her shoulder, ‘there she is now.’
Diana turned, then gasped.
‘Beatrice?’
‘Dirt!’
Beatrice, who had been standing a short distance away behind her friend, and waiting for the right moment to approach, ran forwards now, embracing the scarred girl tightly.
‘Oh my gosh, I can’t believe it’s really you Dirt!’
‘Um…’
Diana hesitated for a moment, before letting out a smile and a sigh, pushing away all her questions, and instead just enjoying the moment.
She hugged Beatrice back, as tightly as she could.
‘Today doesn’t feel real’ she whispered, before letting go of Beatrice, and pushing her back lightly to get a better look at her. ‘I have a new name now’ she told her friend. ‘The Prince…’ she glanced back at him a little uncertain, breaking off her words. ‘Uh…how do I explain…?’
‘It’s ok. I understand.’ Beatrice said. ‘There is nothing to explain.’
‘Gosh I feel so overwhelmed’ Diana chuckled awkwardly.
‘First’ Beatrice said excitedly, ‘tell me your new name.’
‘It’s Diana. The…Prince…. chose it.’
‘Diana’ Beatrice said, feeling the words upon her lips. ‘I like it. It’s better than the one before.’
‘I think so too’ Diana said. ‘But it will take some time to get used to.’
‘No doubt.’
Diana looked over Beatrice’s shoulder then, eyes growing wide.
‘It’s ok’ Beatrice said, seeing her friend’s expression. ‘I understand if you’re afraid.’
‘I…have never seen…’ Diana swallowed the lump in her throat. ‘Is he real?’
‘I am indeed real’ Vladislav spoke up.
Diana flinched at his abrupt voice.
‘I’m sorry to frighten you’ Vladislav spoke softly, raising his hand in a submissive gesture, an action that caused Diana to gasp.

Realising Vladislav had just revealed his skeletal hand, he began to emit a high-pitched whine.
'Are you a kettle?' Diana asked.
'He's just a little uncertain' Beatrice reassured her friend. 'It took me a while to really understand his mannerisms.'
Beatrice looked back to him; eyes warm.
'I am going to marry him' Beatrice went on. 'I love him. I'm *in* love with him. Now I finally realise it.'
Vladislav raised his head then, his jaw beginning to tremble, his eyes burning bright.
'You told me Vladislav' Beatrice said, that the next time we return home, things will be very different.' She smiled. 'I didn't realise how different they would be.'
'I think…' the Prince interrupted, taking a step forwards, 'that we should have a tea-party.'
'What?' (Who says this? It doesn't matter)
'I think this would be a perfect opportunity to do such a thing' the Prince declared merrily. 'You two can catch up on all you've missed' he said to both women. 'And you…' he looked at Vladislav. 'Uh…. I'm sure I can think of some interesting conversations I could have with a mage.'
'And perhaps you could tell me more about your family and future plans' Vladislav replied.
'Good heavens no,' the Prince chuckled heartily for several moments, before composing himself. 'But first, Diana, my darling. We need to get you out of those clothes.'
'Excuse me?' she raised an eyebrow at him.
'Not like…ah…. I mean…' he cleared his throat. 'If you are to sit at my table, you have to dress in something more decent than…*that*…' he indicated her raggedy grey dress.
'If you have better clothes to wear, I would be glad to wear them' Diana said flatly.
'Of course I do' the Prince said indignantly. 'Razzamatazz.'
She materialised out of thin air the very instant she was called upon.
'Yes?' the chimera said.
'What the *fuck* is *that*?!'
'Dirt! Uh…Diana!' Beatrice corrected herself. 'Hold back on the swearing, won't you? At least until he gets a little more used to you. Such language is not becoming of a queen.'
'A queen?' Diana paused. 'Oh. Right.'
'What sort of dress would be appropriate?' Razzamatazz asked, completely ignoring the outburst like she had not noticed.
'Literally anything else' the Prince answered.
'I can speak for myself' Diana voice loudly then, crossing her arms with annoyance.
'Of course,' the Prince bowed to her. 'I'm so sorry.'
'Hm.' She glowered.
'Ah…um…Diana' Beatrice smiled, hugging her shoulders, and leaning into her. 'You haven't changed a bit.'
'Razzamatazz here will take you to the fitting rooms' the Prince said. 'But…' the Prince interrupted suddenly, as Razzamatazz lifted her arm, 'you can walk her there instead. She is not used to teleporting by magic yet.'
Razzamatazz lowered her arm again.
'Of course,' she answered obediently, giving a bow of her head. 'Miss, your majesty. If you'd like to follow me?'
Razzamatazz walked away without a pause, and after a moment of hesitation, and a light shove from Beatrice, Diana followed after her.

‘I will lead you to the table in my personal quarters’ the Prince said to the remaining two. ‘I have my own secret little miniature garden that only I can go. It’s where I would go when I didn’t want to be chased.’
‘When you were a fox?’ Beatrice asked.
‘Yes,’ he nodded.
‘Did you stay in that form all the time?’ Vladislav asked.
‘For the most part.’
Vladislav gave a heavy sigh.
‘What’s wrong?’ Beatrice asked.
Vladislav put his arm gently around Beatrice’s shoulders.
‘I’m just looking forward to going home’ he admitted. ‘I would like to be…. alone with you…’

## Chapter Thirty-Nine
## Tea Party

‘Now that we’re officially a couple, does that mean we have to hold hands?’ Beatrice asked.
‘Only if you want to’ Vladislav answered, emitting a high-pitched whine.
‘Are you embarrassed?’
‘No of course not’ Vladislav answered, clearly flustered.
Beatrice let out a chuckle and a sigh, turning back towards the bookshelf.
They were in the Prince’s private home, a place that was previously off limits to all, besides the Prince himself, and Razzamatazz.
It was a building much like the others on the property, and nothing made it stand out. Which made it perfect for the Prince. It had very few windows, and the ones that were present, were very high, so that light could enter, but wandering eyes could not see in.
The home had its own personal garden, with very high walls, and a little patio, with a round glass table, and several chairs. In the corner of the garden, at the base of one of the walls, was a hole, large enough for a fox to slip through.
‘Diana is finally ready’ the Prince said, addressing Vladislav and Beatrice, who had been spending their time in the private library. ‘If you would like to head towards the garden…’
Vladislav and Beatrice shared a glance, as the Prince headed back out of the room.
They followed him. As they went, Beatrice reached out towards Vladislav, taking his skeletal hand in her own.
Vladislav’s jaw began to tremble, as he emitted a chittering sound, and they walked outside together.

Razzamatazz was just placing a tray of tea and cakes gently upon the glass table, as Vladislav and Beatrice approached.
She straightened, and upon seeing them, turned towards them, greeting them with a silent bow.
‘Where is Diana?’ the Prince asked.

Razzamatazz pointed silently behind the Prince, and he glanced around to see Diana approaching, carrying a tray of her own.
'You should not let our guest lift a finger' the Prince hissed angrily at Razzamatazz.
'She insisted' the chimera replied with no emotion.
'It's ok' Diana said, approaching the table. 'I couldn't let her do all the work. And besides,' she placed her own tray carefully down upon the glass surface, 'it wouldn't feel right not making myself useful.'
The Prince smiled at this, before taking in her new appearance.
Diana wore a simple yellow dress now, the material unblemished and clean. Her skin had been washed, as had her hair, which was styled now in a long plait that sat over her shoulder, and tied at the end with a yellow bow.
'Your favourite colour' Beatrice noted. 'You look beautiful.'
'You took the words right out of my mouth' the Prince gleamed.
Diana smiled then, dipping her head and fidgeting, for the first time, displaying a shy side of her. Vladislav looked on silently.
'Everyone please, take a seat' the Prince hastened.
Everyone sat, and Razzamatazz served each of them drinks upon request.
'Tea or coffee or anything else? How much milk and sugar?'
After this, she went away.
'Isn't she going to sit with us?' Diana asked.
'No' the Prince shook his head. 'Even if she was able to sit in these chairs, she does not like excessive company, especially that of strangers. And besides, she has work to be getting on with.'
'Able to sit…?' Diana echoed. 'Oh, because of her tail……right… um…she's not human is she.'
'How astute of you' Beatrice chuckled.
'*Astute*?' Diana turned to face her friend. 'That's a fancy word. You must have learned a lot in the time you've been gone.'
'Oh, I have' Beatrice clapped her hands excitedly. 'I want to tell you everything, but I don't know where to begin.
'You know' Vladislav began, speaking to Beatrice. 'She reminds me of you when you first came to me. There was so much you did not know.'
Beatrice smiled at that.
'So' Diana began, leaning forwards with her elbows on the table and staring at Vladislav and Beatrice, though mostly Vladislav. 'I am wondering how you two would have sex.'
The Prince choaked on his tea. Vladislav began to let out a high-pitched whine. Beatrice only laughed awkwardly.
'Still as candid as ever' Beatrice chuckled.
'I don't know what *candid* means' Diana replied, a hint of irritation in her voice.
'It means to be *blunt*.'
'Why can't you just use simple words around me like you did before?' Diana asked.
Beatrice only let out a sigh.
'Although' she began, turning to face Vladislav, 'she does have a point. I don't know how…um…'
'So you're still a virgin?' Diana asked.

Beatrice went bright red at that, hunching her shoulders and hanging her head, her hair falling over her face as the Prince laughed heartily.
He composed himself. 'I'm sorry' he said, trying to hide his laugher unsuccessfully in a cough. 'I must have had something in my throat.'
Of course no one believed him.
'I… should probably explain' Vladislav began awkwardly. 'I…. am unable to make love like a regular man would…but I could still have children. And besides, there are different types of love. You can be in love with someone and not be physical with them.'
'Wait…' Beatrice said turning to him, 'you… *can* have children? I thought…'
'I never mentioned it before' Vladislav answered uncomfortably, 'but there are several different ways a creature like me could, including turning myself human… for a short time… It's a difficult thing for me to achieve though, and a very complicated and lengthy process…. But it's possible…'
He fell silent for a moment, head bowed in thought.
'Beatrice' he said, 'if you would like to consider it… I would like to have children with you…'
Beatrice stared at him in surprise for a moment, before smirking and closing her eyes.
'Fine.' She said. 'But on one condition.'
'What's the condition?' Vladislav asked, sounding a little nervous.
'I want twins, one boy, and one girl. And I want to name then both.'
'You want to name them *both*?' Vladislav asked incredulous. 'That isn't fair…surely I get a say… or I get to name one… maybe the boy?'
'Not a chance' Beatrice waved him away. 'I will be carrying and birthing them, so I get all the say.'
'This is preposterous!'
'And I demand you prepare for me…no…. for *us*…' Beatrice went on, 'only the *very best food*. Whatever I demand. *Whenever* I demand.'
'D-demand?'
'Yes. And you have to carry all my stuff' Beatrice continued.
'Stuff? What stuff?'
'Things for the babies' Beatrice answered sweetly.
'I can hire a maid for that sort of thing' Vladislav reasons, waving at the air as if trying to calm an angry horse. 'And maybe a babysitter.'
'A maid!?' Beatrice cried out angrily. 'I'm not letting anyone besides us touch our little treasures!'
'Getting defensive over children you don't have yet?' Diana laughed.
'Of course,' Beatrice answered curtly, as Vladislav continued to splutter in disbelief beside her.
Diana turned towards Vladislav, considering him.
'And how do you eat and drink?' Diana asked Vladislav.
Beatrice glanced at him, and Vladislav demonstrated.
'Hu.' Diana said shortly. 'I don't know what I was expecting.'
'Diana' the Prince interrupted. 'I would love to hear more about you. I want to learn everything about you that there is to know. Even your past' he glanced towards Beatrice. 'As long as you are willing' he finished, looking back towards Diana.
'Hm.' Diana took another sip of her coffee, considering her words. 'Actually' she said, 'I would rather learn more about you. Since you are seemingly to become my husband, and king. 'I think my past has become completely irrelevant now.

‘Well,’ the Prince chuckled. ‘I suppose that is fair enough. Now where do I begin?’
‘From the beginning’ Diana said. ‘Where were you born?’
The Prince gazed at her for a moment, before beginning.
‘I was born in a palace by the sea…’

The sun began to set, and still they talked.
Eventually, it became dark enough that the Prince brought forth his magic, using his ability to light the candles in the garden that were previously unnoticed. And of course, the torch that hung above their heads in an iron cage.
‘We should be going now’ Vladislav said.
‘Will you attend our wedding?’ the Prince asked.
‘We cannot’ Vladislav replied. ‘It would be too much of a grand affair for us’ he said, turning his head towards Beatrice to invite her input, but she only smiled silently back at him. ‘And besides,’ he faced the Prince again. ‘We should plan our own wedding.’
‘This is the first I’m hearing about this’ Beatrice said.
Vladislav turned to her, falling down upon one knee.
‘Beatrice. I love you, and I want to spend the rest of my days with you. Will you marry me?’
Beatrice could only laugh and cry happy tears in response, throwing herself into his arms.
‘Who could have thought… that by the time we return’ Beatrice cried, ‘…that we would be married?’
‘Yes,’ Vladislav replied, eyes burning brightly with pride and happiness. ‘We shall have a modest wedding, on a cliff…by the sea…just the two of us and a priest. It will be a sunny day. And a dog will be the ring-bearer. Asabourougha can be the priest…and… and… ah… I’m afraid I don’t have a ring for you.’
‘That’s ok’ Beatrice said, her voice muffled by Vladislav’s cloak as she continued to embrace him. ‘I’ve decided just now, that I want a ring of flowers, like a daisy-chain’
‘That would be perfect’ Vladislav said. ‘And then we can press them, and frame them in our home. For our future children to see.’
‘That would be perfect’ Beatrice whispered. ‘I am ready to go home.’

## Epilogue I

Vladislav and Beatrice spent many wonderful years together. They had seven children in total, all of which were born healthy, and together, the family lived a happy and undisturbed life.
That was until Beatrice traded her soul to a trickster god named Carmile, in exchange for youth and immortality.
Because she had come to love Vladislav so much, and she wanted to spend the rest of eternity with him.
The seven children then set out on their own adventure, with the intentions of tricking the trickster god, so that their mother Beatrice, could live forever young with her husband, *and* get her soul back. So that when the two of them did finally die, then they could be together in the afterlife.

But that is another story …

## Epilogue II

Diana and the Prince waved at Vladislav and Beatrice as they made their way back to the barn to ready their carriage.
'I suppose they're going to have a lovely journey back' Diana commented. 'The moon is bright tonight' she noted. 'It will light their way clearly.'
The Prince lowered his hand, and stopped waving once the two were out of sight.
'You know' he said. 'They do seem very happy together.'
'Yes,' Diana said. 'They do.' She laughed then. 'I'm jealous. I spent all this time worrying about her, and I didn't realise she was living the best life she could ever have hoped for.'
'I do hope, that we can be like that someday, and love each other like they do.'
Diana turned to face the Prince.
'I never did catch your name.'
'It's Klaus.'
'Oh' Diana said. 'I don't know why it took so long for me to ask.'
'I mean it what I said before' he told her. 'I do promise to do everything I can to give you a happy life.'
'Well,' she answered awkwardly back, 'I hope so. And I'll be good to you too.'
And there, they shared their first kiss, under the moonlight.

A short time after that, they were married, and Diana became queen.
The first few years were difficult for her, as she struggled to adjust, but with Klaus by her side to support and to guide her, she was happy and content, and in time, began to truly fall in love.

A few years after their marriage, Diana gave birth to their first child, and this time, she was able to keep him.
'A boy' Klaus said, crying tears of joy as he held the newborn baby in his arms. 'This is the happiest day of my life….'
Diana sighed with exhaustion, reaching a trembling hand out to him.
He took it, leaning in close, holding her head tenderly to his chest, kissing her gently. In his other hand, he held the crying baby.
'Is he healthy?' Diana whispered.
'Yes. Yes, he's healthy.'
'Ah' Diana sighed, closing her eyes, 'I'm glad… I must rest…'

## After-Story I
## Many years after the Wedding

Diana sat upon the stone balcony, playing a beautiful melody upon her violin. No other sound could be heard this high within the palace, not even from any birds. There was only the gentle tune, utterly heavenly and divine. She was completely focused, consumed by the music, the slight furrow of her brow showing the concentration on her face.
When she eventually played the final note, a high-pitched tune that stretched on, only then did she open her eyes, lowering the instrument and bow to her lap.
She looked around, seeing her husband watching her from afar, their child, their healthy boy, resting against his hip. This was their second child. Their first child, another boy, was elsewhere in the city, learning about magic.
'You are like an angel playing in the clouds' the king said to her. 'My beautiful wife.'
She smiled widely, dipping her head then.
He approached, sitting beside her. They shared a kiss, before the boy began to fuss, wanting attention.
'You should take him' Klaus said, caressing her scarred face, gazing at her adoringly, before glancing down at the boy. 'I think he's gotten bored of his dad. He wants you now.'
She accepted the boy from him, and he sat happily on her lap.
'Are you hungry?' Klaus asked her.
'Always' she grinned.
'How do you feel?'
She looked up at him, smiling widely.
'Amazing' she said.
'Have you told Beatrice yet?' he asked.
'I sent a bird earlier' Diana said, bouncing the child on her lap. 'She will probably receive it later today. I don't think she would have expected a third.'

## After-Story II
## Many years after the Wedding

Beatrice leant over the anvil, hammering away. Freya, now fully grown, watched over her as she worked, resting comfortably atop the wardrobe.

Beatrice paused, only for a moment, before continuing.

A few seconds passed, then without warning Beatrice turned, lifting the hammer, and blocking the attack that came her way.

Beatrice smirked at the figure, tilting her head.

'Silly boy' Beatrice chuckled. 'You give yourself away too easily.'

It was her eldest child, Nicholas.

She and Vladislav had had seven children over the years. Their first being Nicholas, a lively character, seventeen years in age. Then there was Tatiana, a girl, the fighter. Alexi, a boy of fifteen, the feisty prankster. A girl, Alexandra, thirteen, the healer. The twin girls, Olga and Maria aged ten. Then there was Michael, their youngest, a boy aged eight.

'How did you know?' the boy asked incredulous, stepping back, and lowering his sword. 'How did you know I was there?'

He held his practice sword. Though it was metal, it was completely blunt.

Beatrice refused to say, because she found it more amusing to let him wonder. She would never let him know, that it was Freya's sudden attentiveness that alerted her to his presence.

'Have you finished your studies?' she asked him, putting the hammer back down.

Nicholas shrank a little.

'You didn't run away again, did you?' Beatrice scolded, placing her hands upon her hips and frowning.

And that was when Vladislav appeared.

'There you are' he said to the boy. 'You thought you could escape me?'

Nicholas's shoulders slumped. Feeling defeated by both his parents.

'Please go back inside' Vladislav said to him. 'You need to set the table. Dinner is just about ready.'

'Yes father' Nicholas grumbled, slumping past Vladislav, and back outside.

Vladislav chuckled at that, turning to Beatrice.

'How is the sword?'

'Nearly finished' she replied, turning back and grabbing it with tongs, placing it in water to cool it.

The metal instantly hissed, steam billowing.

'I've brought gift for you my love' he said, revealing his secret hidden within his heavy sleeve, presenting it to her.

'A black calla lily' Beatrice smiled, taking it from her. 'My favourite flower.'

He caressed her skin, and she kissed the bony nose of his skull.

They left the forge, heading back outside, hand in hand.

They walked for a short time, before he suddenly lifted her in his arms, and she giggled with delight, holding onto his horns for support. He held her close,

She saw a distinct bird coming their way. Vladislav put her down, and Beatrice raised her arm. The bird landed on her closed fist, she took the letter tied to its leg, then the bird took flight again, flying in the direction of its home.

Beatrice opened the letter, and began to read. She knew the letter was from her good friend Diana, despite it not being marked.

They had kept in touch over the years, and though they managed to visit each other in person often, thanks to the magic each of their husbands possessed, they still kept in touch via letter. Diana insisted, because in the beginning, like Beatrice, she had been working on learning to read and write. And in time, had even come to enjoy it.

They would share tips on motherhood, how to get their babies to sleep peacefully and eat their food without fuss. They would share milestones and stories of their lives, and would occasionally recall their wedding days to each other, and how different they were. One was grand and attended by thousands, with the most beautiful dress and jewels, and the other, was small, with the only guests being seagulls, with the rings being made of a few daisies chained together.

Despite growing up in similar situations, the two could not more different, living lives that now were worlds apart. One was a queen, powerful and adored. While the other, was secretive and unknown, keeping mostly to herself and living a modest life. And yet they had remained great friends.

Beatrice finished reading, folding up the letter and tucking it away.

‘What is it?’ Vladislav asked, leaning over her with his hands behind his back. ‘What does the letter say?’

‘Diana is pregnant with their third child’ Beatrice said.

Beatrice turned, leaning into him, holding him again.

For the longest time they just held each other in silence, until Beatrice finally spoke.

‘I’m so happy…’